



The Gray Snowman

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The events of that period twenty years ago have returned to my memory like a stage being lit. I see them first as a somber, bluish-green tableau. But then, as if through a window beside the tableau, a warm light emerges. It was a period of confusion. And above all else, suffering. Because it was left unfulfilled? On the other hand, are any of life's stages ever brought to perfection? There are periods in our past that can't be dismissed with a flippant "Oh, *that* time." They may be short periods, but they work their influence throughout our lives. Nevertheless, daily life is a powerful healer. Day after day snow and rain have fallen, flowers have withered and bloomed, and that period has gradually scabbed over, like a wound grown slowly insensible.

We—yes, it's all right now to refer to myself as part of the group—we locked ourselves up evening after evening in that rundown print shop, flush with a fever I didn't understand. It was an ordinary corner print shop on a seedy commercial street on the outskirts of Seoul. We met there every evening for almost three months, they and I tethered to our work, neither of us knowing a thing about the other. Why does the name of that ordinary print shop escape me? It must be selective memory—how else to explain it?

A short article I recently came across in the newspaper has brought back that period to me with the immediacy of yesterday and today. The article was already a couple of days old, and finding it was even more of a coincidence because, sitting in the reference room of the National Library, I was supposed to be looking at the editorial pages and not the city pages. I was doing research for an ex-professor who was writing a book.

I can't say I *read* that short piece. More accurately speaking, my eyes swept over it with lightning speed. There, looming huge before me, was my own name. My heart jumped dizzily and for a moment I sat stupefied. As the next shock wave hit, I cautiously scanned my surroundings, but as usual that section of the reference room was nearly vacant. Besides myself there was only the man with glasses who for several days had laid out on the desk before him some sort of statistical data before dozing for half the morning.

And then I read the article in a whisper, my lips moving, as if practicing words of tenderest affection. I read it again and again, as though memorizing a formula that wouldn't register in my mind. This was the article:

A Korean woman was found dead in New York's Central Park on the 26th. The woman carried a long-expired passport that bore the name Kang Ha-wŏn, age 41. The Korean Association, however, is questioning her identity. The woman is listed as an illegal alien. An inquest revealed the cause of death to be starvation.

I checked the date of the newspaper, then flipped through the city pages of other dailies. In none of them did I find anything similar. I returned to the page of the newspaper spread out before me. The violent palpitations of my heart eased, and from a place deep inside me there gradually surfaced a peculiar sensation, accompanied by a faint convulsion. At first I felt regret, a long-standing regret, it seemed, for something that could never be repaired. A regret with no concrete object. But nestled in that regret was, paradoxically enough, relief.

If any of the others of us from that period had seen the article, what would his reaction have been? Shouldn't we have been dashing to the telephone and making contact with one another as soon as possible? But perhaps the article had escaped their notice. More likely, the events of our past were too long ago, and I'd been forgotten by them. And perhaps, well before the article appeared, they expected that an incident of this sort would happen sooner or later.

In spite of all this, I found myself rummaging quickly through my handbag for my old address book. Their addresses remained, but I had never tried to contact them. In any case, these people's important positions would make it difficult for us to meet, even assuming I could reach them.

With trembling hands I excised the article with the point of my pen, then tucked it away in the address book. I put away the reference materials, packed up my things, and left. The autumn sky was innocently clear.

We were four in number. Why has that word *we* always intimidated and discomfited me? We were not, of course, *we* from the very beginning. And the many people who had known the others in the group would oppose my use of *we*. But I will take the liberty of employing it, regardless of what they think.

What made us *us* was Alexei Astachev's *The Poetics of Violence: Biography of an Unknown Anarchist*. The title of this insignificant book is unimportant, though that title has lingered in my memory. It was a difficult period. I'd completed my first semester at college and was forced by poverty to sell my textbooks in order to buy new books for the following semester. This meant numerous trips to the second-hand bookstores along Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn; in one of the shops I found this book, whose author I'd never heard of, and obtained it for the price of a meal of instant noodles. That black casebound volume, now dimly distant in my memory, began with a piece of agitation that read something like this: "Comrades, if you have courage, throw away this book that has fettered you; if you are perceptive, read this book and then add it to the fire."

In those days I was intent on collecting banned books that I found at the second-hand bookshops. It gave me the sort of thrill one might get from collecting

guns. They were also like money in the bank, something I could sell when I ran out of cash, and because they were fated to leave my rented room someday I read my banned books with a passion. But I was merely an impoverished student during that time, most ordinary and of no account, someone frequenting the second-hand bookshops of Ch'onggyech'ŏn to make ends meet.

I was tormented, in those days, by a fear that someone from my home town would come and take me back. If that were to have happened, I would have had to give up my tiny room, and so I never felt free.

My heart wasn't really in my course work, and because I needed to earn spending money I began tutoring children. Till late at night, and even during the day, I would teach Korean, English, math—the usual things—and occasionally “*Ich bin, du bist*” or “*Comment allez-vous?*” Though these were languages I'd never studied formally, I'd teach them after a day's brush-up; it was a common practice at the time.

I readily took on such jobs as they presented themselves. I knew that I might one day be exposed as incompetent, but my immediate problem was to save up some money. I indulged in only one pleasure: upon returning to my chilly room at night I would smoke, a habit I'd picked up in school.

The following semester I had no luck attracting students to tutor. Even before that semester was over I packed up my texts and walked from my room at the high point of Y Precinct to Ch'onggyech'ŏn. There in the corner of one of the shops was a pile of textbooks, unsold, which I had brought in before. It was that very visit that led to my meeting a man I'll simply call An. The bookshop owner gave me a telephone number, saying someone was looking for the book by Alexei Astachev that I had obtained from his shop several months earlier. It was a day of omnipresent gloom, thick as the bottom of a beer bottle. My empty stomach wouldn't sustain me another day, and so I found a pay phone and deposited my last coin.

With certain people it's impossible to tell precisely where they belong, where they come from, what their family background is . . . I mean those people who pop out of the woodwork right before your eyes, talk nonchalantly about this and that, then disappear from your life. But in contrast with the superficial manner of such people, An's manner was precise and level-headed when he introduced himself. He said he operated a small shop that printed business cards and all sorts of greeting cards, that he enjoyed listening to music, and that Erik Satie was his father. From such particulars I didn't see anything in common between us, and I was too burdened by the poverty that was my constant companion to take an interest in his affairs. My knowledge of music was limited to what I heard over the radio, and it took me some two months to realize that An was joking about the French composer Erik Satie being his father. Anyway, I relinquished the book and gained a week's living expenses in return. An slipped the book into his briefcase without even checking the title, then said in a noncommittal tone, “From what I can tell, you're in a tight situation—let's see if there's some work you could do for me.”

I wondered what it was that had prompted him to say this. My shabby clothes?

My shriveled body, burdened with melancholy since birth? Or perhaps the glint of a thirst hidden deep in my gaze? In those days I could hope for nothing short of a miracle to rescue me, and it didn't matter who the instrument of that miracle might be.

We met again two days later and from then on I went to his print shop three afternoons a week to do odd jobs. Proofreading, folding printed cards and invitations, and such. From time to time I also delivered orders. Thanks to An I had a place to work and some variety in my life. But I felt I could never trust a person who said his favorite pastime was listening to music.

Deciding to take the coming semester off, I devoted myself full time to the print shop. Typesetting was added to my odd jobs, and I delivered orders more frequently. There wasn't that much work, and the three other employees left without fail at the end of each workday. By dinnertime I would be wandering the still-unfamiliar streets of Seoul before returning to my room. The coal briquette in my stove had always burned out by the time I got home, which made it a chore to cook. I would take the clothes iron I'd picked up from who knows where, prop it upside-down on a few books, toast some cheap bread on it, and make do with that.

There was no doubt in my mind in those days that I would soon be dead. I even imagined the date of my death. I was sure it would be April, maybe in the coming year, maybe in the year after. And since my death would attract no notice, it would be some time before my mother's sister—my only immediate family—was informed. Maybe she would breathe a sigh of relief and say something like, "The poor thing runs off with some money and look what happens—she couldn't even keep herself alive." When my death approached me in such vivid terms, I looked about my cramped room in bewilderment but couldn't bring myself to venture out.

At such moments An's face sometimes appeared. I couldn't help but be startled by this bizarre association. Although it was already several weeks since I'd met An, he rarely appeared at the print shop, and after that first meeting we'd had no opportunity to talk person to person. "You poor kid," I would murmur to myself. "It's because An is the only one who's been kind to you in Seoul." Glancing about the room, I would see the thick book on my table, written in German by an Italian historian. I was determined to translate it, as if I were composing my last will and testament. A humbling task for someone with no formal training in either Italian or German.

Like the tangled syntax of German, Italian, and Korean, life seemed impossible and unfamiliar to me. My anticipation of death, on the other hand, was quite clear; I could live with it easily enough.

Winter arrived and the orders for New Year's greeting cards and funeral notices accumulated. I began working late more frequently. A man named Chang, who managed the shop in An's absence, seemed to feel this was a great opportunity to work overtime and make money, but whenever he received a phone call from An he closed the shop at the end of the normal workday and cleared us out. This happened twice or more a week, so to keep up with the orders we had to work on

weekends. This was fine with me since I was thankful for a reason to leave my room each day. At work, no one spoke of An, and I couldn't manufacture a way to bring him up in conversation.

The orders for seasonal greeting cards ended and there followed a winter that was truly difficult to endure. I tried my best to resist the urge to go home and visit my aunt. I felt that once I went back to the countryside, I'd spill out all my bitterness, ask forgiveness, and just plop myself down there. The repetitive work at the print shop was a source of tremendous comfort to me. But when my loneliness became too much to bear, I sought out a friend from back home, a nurse's aide. I found her sick in bed in the very hospital where she worked, and in no condition to ask me how I had been or where I was living. She told me she was recovering from an appendectomy, but as I left the hospital I heard myself mutter, "She's lying; I'll bet she had an abortion." It was then that I realized I had become so impoverished that I believed in no one.

How much of our behavior can be explained logically? It was after ten o'clock by the time I left the hospital, but instead of going home I found myself headed toward the shop. I'd left nothing there, nor did I have work that demanded finishing. The metal screen was down over the front door, but I could see a faint light inside. I grew suspicious, for I distinctly recalled having turned off the light before locking up.

As I approached the back door I heard the sound of a machine. I tugged gently on the small door. The key to the shop's back door was in my handbag, but I didn't dare open the lock. Instead, I strained to listen. From the office inside came low-pitched voices and music. The three male voices would rise from a muted murmur to a heated exchange. By listening carefully I was able to distinguish An's voice, and I forced myself to focus on it. The voices weren't loud enough for me to understand what was being said, and the texture of An's voice was effectively masked by the slightly deeper voice of another man.

Needless to say, I didn't knock on the door or call out his name. I just stood there. The steady turning of the printing press, just audible from the front of the shop, sounded like a train approaching from a distance.

It was a month and a half before I was able to sit down with An face to face. He had summoned me, or perhaps I should say invited me, to dinner. It was a simple meal at a Chinese restaurant downtown. The bus we took was packed, making conversation impossible on the way. At the restaurant our surroundings were so noisy and chaotic that I had to shout at the top of my lungs to answer the simplest questions about myself. It was a stunted conversation: at one point An asked where I was from, but I misunderstood the question and in response told him the address of my rented room. Not that I had much to say, but I grew progressively tight-lipped nevertheless, leaving only stupid thoughts such as this to circulate inside my head: *I appreciate your giving me a job, because otherwise I'd have to go back home to my aunt's place branded a thief, and I'd rather die than do that, so there's no telling what kind of trouble you've saved me from.*

The winter air was clear and pure; it was cold enough to freeze all the germs in the city. Following An toward the Secret Garden in search of a café where it was easier to talk, I had an urge to tell him all the things I had never felt before arriving in Seoul. But as he walked just ahead of me, he seemed preoccupied. He is taller, thinner, and older than I am, I thought. But he talks even less. What is there to connect us? I wondered anxiously.

An casually pushed open the door to a bar and entered. What would he tell me? Whatever it is, it'll be a complete shock to me, I thought, something decisive that I'll never forget, something that will change my life all at once. As I followed An through the door, it occurred to me that I could simply return to my room. But it was too late. I was enveloped by the warm, dense air inside. So, this is how people forge their destiny, I told myself. Though aware of impending catastrophe, in a momentary lapse people give themselves up passively to some unopposable system, and thereby have the compass of their lives reset. But this passivity is a choice, too.

There are certain incongruities in a room that leave their mark in our mind. Take for example the beaming face of the actress on the calendar hanging on the wall: she was on the other side of my beer glass, and I couldn't take my eyes from her. Trying to put off the fateful moment I knew was approaching, I watched that empty face until her bright smile looked exaggerated and her gaudy clothes reeked of cheapness.

"Well, what have you found out so far?" An was so curt I couldn't help flinching at his question. It startled me into silence. "I know that you've been checking up on me."

I now understood why An had brought me here. After that first chance visit to the shop on the night I heard his voice inside, I had gone back, but I had always stayed only long enough to pick out An's voice. I was all the more surprised because I had never been confronted by An or by anyone else. My face burned. I felt as if I had suddenly bumped into An while lurking in that dark alley outside the shop.

"I'm sorry." My head drooped. The peculiarity of my actions became all too clear to me. I apologized once more. Arms folded, An solemnly examined my expression.

"Miss Kang, are you sure you can handle the consequences of your curiosity?"

Would he have understood if I had told him that I kept going out at night because death was tempting me, harassing me; that I hovered about the print shop because I had no place else to go; that the sound of his voice from inside the door reassured me? I knew it wasn't a matter of spying, not even of curiosity. But he wouldn't have understood.

"It's . . . not a matter of curiosity," I began.

But I couldn't continue. For some reason I found myself utterly mute. *When you travel at night, I silently said, don't you walk toward light? The light I chose was your shop; why should it be a crime for me to journey there? Don't you sometimes take comfort from something insignificant? Like the sound of someone's voice, or a certain ambiance? If I drew a bit of reassurance and comfort from your voice and from envying what you and the others were doing, how could that be a problem for you?* I swallowed, and in doing so swallowed the words that An wouldn't have understood.

His expression still said, "Well?"

"If you want, I'll quit working there."

I looked up at him and for the first time let resentment fill my face. It wasn't hard to imagine how he was feeling, for I had often encountered my twisted visage in the mirror.

"All right then," he said. Just like that.

Having nothing further to say, I took my handbag and slowly rose.

But before I could leave he added, "Or, maybe you'd like to help us out in the evening?"

I took this as an attempt to lighten the mood. And in fact he was smiling, the whites of his eyes looming large. Some people's eyes are like that, my aunt had told me; I should be careful with such people. An's smile was that of someone who finds himself in a fix. I put my bag back on the table and sat down again.

"Aren't you going to ask what it involves?"

I shook my head. This man wouldn't understand me at all, I thought.

As we were about to catch the last bus before curfew, An handed me a folded sheet of paper.

"Remember the book you sold me? This was inside. I forgot all about it. Better keep an eye on it."

It was a brief letter of invitation from my mother, who had left me with my aunt in order to go off to the United States with a man who worked as a chauffeur for the American army. It had arrived after an interval in which there was no word from her. Why the invitation, I don't know. It may have been that the awfulness of the news from our homeland had reached her abroad and reawakened long-dormant maternal sentiments. Or perhaps her living situation had shown a slight improvement. Or else she was being frivolous, well aware I wouldn't be able to go to America. What I had brought with me to Seoul from my home town were that letter and, unbeknownst to my aunt, the money I had stolen to use for my college tuition. All of that money—to have been used for my uncle's hospital expenses—had come from the sale of family land. The letter had slipped my mind.

It was becoming plainer by the day that school was a pointless luxury. I decided to drop out and be done with it. Having made that decision, I felt more settled. I obtained an application for a leave of absence and gave myself plenty of time to fill it out. There was nothing unusual about this, for me or, of course, for anyone else. It was my second leave of absence from school. Moreover, in the year or more I had been at that school, I had met virtually no one. Now, nobody would look for me in the crannies of this huge city of Seoul. Evening trips to the print shop became a regular part of my life, at first maybe three or four times a week, and then almost every night.

I was still in the habit of aimlessly wandering the streets. That habit intensified and I spent the long hours before going to the print shop riding the bus from one end of

the line to the other, or else walking most of that distance. I guess this was more a propensity in me than a matter of killing time. It's as if an incurable disease inhabits people who can never settle down in life. I wondered if anyone had walked the ins and outs of Seoul as I had. I felt that by passing a place I'd invested it with a trace of my own life. But no matter how I sampled this city—took in its odors, longed for it—not one person or street accepted me. I felt rebuffed by the weather, too, just like the first cold morning I stepped off the train in Seoul. I seemed to drift over this earth like a spirit with no place to settle. Where had I gone wrong?

But that period of wandering—which I recall now as though through a gloom thick as a liquor bottle's glass bottom—became the most eventful time of my life. If not for it, there'd really be nothing to say about my life. Because even though it was a period of misunderstanding, uncertainty, and suspicion, for me it was a beginning.

To this day I can't be sure why An invited me to work with him, and without questioning me further. It must have been about three months before the disappearance of their Cultural Revolution Association—an underground movement established more than five years earlier—that I decided to join them. I wasn't a confirmed socialist, and although I collected books of that stripe, I wasn't theoretically equipped to comprehend them. Nevertheless, faithful to the employers who provided me my work, I read and proofread the writings they composed; and except for the riskier cases, I intermittently took on the chore of distributing them. At a time when any sort of anti-government movement disintegrated as soon as it was uncovered, it was inconceivable to me that their activities had continued for more than five years.

Three people were responsible for the printing: An, Kim, and Chŏng, whom everyone called Scratch Paper because he worked during the day at a precinct office. They mentioned an endless stream of other people, but I didn't know and never asked whether these people actually existed or if the names were real. An, Chŏng, and Kim existed, and to me that was sufficient. They never tried to exclude me from what they were doing or conceal their methods. We worked together printing and proofreading leaflets that were distributed at demonstrations and in the countryside. But there was always a distinct distance between me and them. At times I wondered if they felt comfortable with that distance, and I would lose sleep over it for days at a stretch. However, I made no effort to eliminate that distance: life was already more than I could deal with.

One morning, in a spasm of activity, I rose and sent a letter to my mother. There was nothing in particular to occasion this letter. It wasn't that I missed her. But by that particular date I was supposed to complete the application for my passport, something difficult to obtain at the time and possible only if one had a letter of invitation.

"Mother, I turned twenty yesterday. I can't believe it's already twelve years we've been living apart, and four years since you left for America. I hope your work at the stuffed-animal factory isn't too difficult . . ."

I had nothing more to write. I didn't give her my address, nor did I mention the

passport or what I was doing in Seoul. That evening I threw myself into my work at the print shop. The next day I stayed at home. I bundled myself in several layers of thick clothes and spent the entire day in my poorly heated room translating that volume I'd abandoned, the book written in German by an Italian historian. I didn't go to the print shop. More than once, though, I found myself getting up and preparing to go out. Only when the midnight curfew signal was sounded on the radio did I give up. I had not quite three pages of translation to show for my day's work. The night was unusually windy and for once I was amused by the continual hacking and spitting of the drunks coming up the hill. The more profound the cold, the deeper people seemed to sink into drunkenness.

The following night I went to the print shop a few minutes early and found An waiting alone for his comrades. He immediately demanded to know how he could get in touch with me. My absence the previous evening had held things up and everyone had been quite worried about me. Something in his tone suggested he wasn't so much worried about me personally as he was slightly mistrustful and anxious. I thought of giving him my landlord's telephone number but didn't want to create problems, and so I gave him my address and left it at that, telling him that since I was a fugitive of sorts he was not, under any circumstances, to pass it on to anyone else. With an expression of disbelief An looked deep into my eyes, trying to interpret my meaning. My situation was very private, I told him. It wasn't important whether he believed me. I guess I wanted to insinuate to these people that in one sense my circumstances were the same as theirs.

The nightly discussions at the print shop gradually became lengthier, more intense. I kept my eyes on the proofs and made myself as small as possible in my corner, but at the same time listened intently to their conversations. When they vented their impassioned words, I tried not to move, often feeling like a piece of needlessly heavy furniture that merely took up a lot of space and was difficult to move around. I tried not to miss a word they said. For the most part they talked about the riskiness of staying together and about their writing.

I knew virtually nothing about their personal lives. From their talk, however, I gradually came to learn various incidentals: Chǒng had recently quit his job at the precinct office, Kim was writing drama criticism, An and Chǒng were from the same province, and An had been expelled from a music school. But that was all. It was only by chance remarks that I learned their ages. An was twenty-seven, Chǒng a year younger, and Kim, who was married with two children, three years older. There were people they often referred to when problems involving their group came up. Among them was Kim Hŭi-jin, who seemed to be responsible for a considerable portion of their planning. In fact, I had proofread a couple of articles bearing that name on the by-line. Sometime earlier I had developed the habit of trying to imagine the faces of the people who had written what I was proofreading. I endowed one person with a long beard, another with a sad, thin face. On very rare occasions one or two of these people dropped by the print shop, but of course there was almost never a match with any facet of my imaginings. The rest of the time just

the four of us were at the print shop, but my presence discouraged the others from speaking at length about their private lives.

As I listened to them talk, a slender hope was born inside me, that the business of life didn't have to be as hellish as I made it out to be. I grew more optimistic, thinking I could become one of them by taking a more positive attitude, instead of feeling that with each step I was sinking deeper into quicksand.

Slowly I came to a better understanding of the materials I printed, proofread, and distributed—and what effects they were meant to achieve. But I was still distant from them, and they were distant from me.

From time to time An would tell me as we left for home, “Miss Kang, you can leave anytime you feel like quitting. I realize we're giving you too much work and not enough compensation.” But far from quitting, I would arrive at the print shop before anyone else and keep to my seat until the words “Time to go” dropped from someone's lips. Kim began to tease me with a nickname: The Leech. But none of the three asked me to join them in their discussions. The days passed in this state of uneasy balance.

One day as I returned home late, my landlady popped outside all in a tizzy before I could even duck through the small door in the front gate. A policeman had been there, she said. My gaze went to the lock on the wooden door of my kitchen, which gave access to my room. It didn't seem to have been opened. I sighed with relief and asked the landlady for particulars. All she would tell me was that the policeman would return the following day. With a fearful expression she returned inside, slamming her door.

Should I call An? That might be risky, I decided. I examined my room for anything that might lead someone to the shop. The row of used books against the wall caught my eye. Several of them might attract a policeman's attention, so I hid them beneath a bundle of clothes in the corner. I checked my watch. Ten minutes until midnight. I gave up on the idea of calling An and plopped myself down on the floor. Since I was away only in the evenings, the coal briquettes that heated my floor rarely had time to burn out. I placed my hands and feet beneath my quilt near the firebox and gave myself up to a stream of tears, accompanied by feelings of fatalism. Lying open on my table was the book that I seemed forever to be translating. Across it crawled a tiny spider.

I took one more look about the room, spread out my bedding, and lay down, but couldn't sleep. I tried to think of all the ways my working at the print shop might be discovered. Almost immediately I had to pause. I knew too little about the three who worked there. Weighed down by distrust and regret, I watched the night's layers of darkness alternate before me. There was no one moment of utter blackness. I saw violet, I saw dark gray; the colors of that anxious night when I waited for the policeman were simply splendid.

To my great surprise, the plainclothes detective who called the next day was merely interested in verifying my identity, part of the process of issuing my long-forgotten passport. Since this was back in the time when authorities would actually

interview people when they wanted genuine proof of identity, I took the detective to a hillside tearoom where we could talk. Although I responded calmly enough to his questions, my heart pounded from start to finish. The detective had given my room only a cursory glance, and his questions were not very probing. I told him I was taking time off from school to visit my mother and was doing occasional tutoring to get by, and that my travel expenses would arrive sooner or later from the U.S. Probably the most unbelievable part of the story, for me, was the idea of actually going to the U.S. to see my mother. But I explained all of this with complete assurance. The detective, neglecting the practice of accepting money for verification of identity, which applied even to persons of spotless reputation, scurried away down the hill.

A month later, passport in hand, I took my mother's letter of invitation and went to the heavily guarded American embassy to complete the visa formalities. Fortunately, because my permanent address was that of my aunt, there was nothing to arouse suspicion, even in the eyes of these officials who were concerned about illegal immigration. And then, as if in revenge for the time and expense I'd wasted, I stuffed the passport into a bundle of odds and ends and returned the banned books to their place against the wall.

Certain nights made me realize that these were dark times for them. Even the theatrical Kim, ordinarily a jokester, would spend the whole evening silent and preoccupied while the others sat around the stove drinking on empty stomachs. Small disagreements developed into arguments, and materials already printed were ripped up. Those were the most difficult moments for me. I could see the others were trying to read my mind, wondering if they could argue openly in my presence. I felt awkward, and would leave first when there was nothing to do; it was impossible for me to ask them if something had happened to cause the problems. I would sit at home during the day, gazing at my books, waiting for evening, when I could return to the print shop. Once, Chõng confronted An about me, suggesting that my participation in their activities put them at risk. An's only response was a grin. I wished he had defended me more vigorously, but what could he have said?

This was the heyday of government censorship and official investigations, and almost daily the newspapers ran articles about people being arrested and seditious publishing activities being squelched. But these articles exposed only a fraction of the underground publishing going on.

For some time now we had been gathering almost nightly at the print shop to complete a special publication of some three hundred pages. According to the others, two of the authors whose work we had recently typeset had been taken into custody. An urged us on in our work, saying that scarcely a week remained until an absolutely essential conference would be held. We worked past midnight, as was often the case, and one or more of the others regularly spent the night at the shop, working and then cleaning up to remove any suspicious untidiness by morning. Most of the time it was Kim and An. No one ever used the phone, but the manuscripts arrived like clockwork nevertheless. After they left my hands as first proofs,

they returned with corrections and emendations a day or two later, without fail, in a plastic basket.

One night I remained at the print shop after curfew. It seemed the natural thing to do. Chŏng and Kim appeared to have business elsewhere and had turned over their work to me early on. I told An I would finish up and he could leave first, but he replied that he had something to write and retreated to his desk; he seemed to think it quite normal that I was staying to assist him. I gave the stove a generous helping of coal from the tin bucket. The action seemed so familiar it surprised me: it was as if I were heating a house I had long occupied. An was writing at his metal desk with his back to me. I had been sneaking looks at what he was writing and I wondered how it was developing. I examined his progress with great interest, like someone following a serialized drama on the radio. I took the corrected proofs from the plastic basket. The wind whistling beneath the flimsy window had grown colder with the coming of midnight. I opened the stove vent a bit more, pulled my chair alongside, and sat there with the galley proofs in my lap. For the first time since we'd met over three months ago An spoke to me in plain-speech forms, dropping the polite endings from his verbs.

"Miss Kang," he said nonchalantly, "don't you think you ought to wash your hands of this work before you get implicated?"

I looked at him with a blank expression, unsure how to take this. He was still writing. From my chair near the stove I could see only a part of his face. I decided to ignore his remarks and returned to my proofs.

"You ought to resume your studies, find yourself a steady job, and get married."

Perhaps because of the gloomy tone in his voice I took these words, which I would ordinarily have interpreted as a casual put-down, to be a deliberate insult.

"Because once everything blows up, you'll have nothing but trouble ahead of you."

He swiveled around toward me. The stove had just begun to heat up and I pushed my chair back as I felt the warmth radiate to my face. Was he joking? He didn't seem to be. His exhaustion only served to deepen the lines of his face. I hardly recognized it. How could the same person's face look so different? I scrutinized him as if I were sitting across from someone I'd never met.

"Now don't take this the wrong way."

"Mr. An, why are you devoted to a cause you're so unsure will succeed?"

"It's not me who's unsure. What I mean is, I'm hoping in the near future there will be a lot more people who *are* sure."

We fell silent for a moment. I was of two minds about our rare, whispered conversation: on the one hand I hoped it would long continue, though I didn't care what we talked about, and on the other hand I wished that gaze, so weary and exhausted, would return to the page in front of him. An stretched his arms, and in that moment seemed to regain his energy. He turned back to his desk.

"Anyway, once we're done with this particular project, I think it's better if you stay at home until I get in touch with you," he said without looking at me.

Was this some plan they'd cooked up to get rid of me? True, a girl like me whose

background and true colors were uncertain must be troublesome to deal with. But I'd worked faithfully with them until now; what further proof did they need?

"I'll give you a little bit of help with your tuition," he added in a soft tone.

That hurt. Had my life these past few months grown so comfortable that my pride could be injured by this offer of assistance? Even the warmth in his voice seemed to be coming from a cold, calculated distance.

"You don't have to worry about me, Mr. An. I'll soon be leaving the country. I've already arranged for my passport."

My sudden change of tone could well have sounded slightly farcical, but he didn't look back. Nor did he respond to my words.

Two o'clock passed and finally An seemed to be done for the night. He turned out the light over his desk, unfolded his army cot, and lay down. I wasn't sleepy. I had work to do, but I didn't want to disturb his sleep, so I added the remaining coal to the stove, narrowed the vent, then lay down on the nearby sofa, which An had left for me because it was more comfortable than the cot. Although I had trouble falling asleep, I tried not to toss and turn or to make noise. I tried to steady my breathing, but this just made me heave great sighs instead. I closed my eyes and imagined I was talking to An: *You don't know a thing about me, Mr. An. I was born in the Ch'ungch'öng countryside. We were poor and unhappy. And then for quite a long time I lived at my aunt's. My mother went to the city to find work, leaving me with my aunt's family in the country. I guess Mom sent some money for support, but I remained poor and unhappy. I dropped out of middle school, and later took a high-school equivalency exam. But none of these stages in my life seems real to me now. Am I the only one who feels this way? That's what I'd like to know. Or do others, even a little? For example, I don't think you feel like this at all—am I right?*

I fell asleep to the sound of An's regular breathing and his tossing and turning. Sometime later I vaguely felt—as if I were dreaming of something from the distant past—the gentle pressure of someone tucking my blanket up to my neck, and then that same person stroking my hollow, emaciated cheek, and I sank briefly into a sound sleep. I seem to remember, too, that I sobbed as I slept.

For some time there had been more work on weekends than during the week, and so I should have realized that news of a weekend off did not bode well. True, I'd only been helping them slightly more than two months, but during that time I hadn't once had two consecutive days without work. It's so strange: on the rare occasions that I think back to that time I experience a distortion of my memories. I harbor the illusion that our labors took place at some dim hour late each night when not just the city but the whole world was asleep. In any case, when they finally gave me a weekend off, I believed it was due to some secret task they had to do, in which I couldn't be involved. Once again I felt merely like an employee who did odd jobs for them. I didn't belong, and I was miserable those two days off, just me and my companion: suspicion.

My room seemed a ship dangerously afloat on the winter seas, and on that

deserted ship I waited desperately, expecting the worst. On Saturday evening it snowed. I applied myself to the book I was translating, which lay perpetually open on my table, but before I could finish half a page I was worn out and gave up. I put on my jacket (the only coat I had), stuck my hands in my armpits to keep them warm, and read a book that the three others were always talking about. I don't recall the title or author, but what I wrote after reading it proves that even a person like me was not immune to narcissism. I called it "Reflections on the Non-Historicity of an Alienation Called Poverty." The weekend passed in this unhurried fashion. Sunday night arrived and I started to feel settled. I no longer waited for anyone.

In the morning I looked forward to throwing off my solitary confinement. To make the time go quickly, I cheerfully cleaned my long-neglected room, then strolled up and down the hilly street, now coated gray with snow and ash, whistling as I went. While the faint sunshine sneaked among the clustered plank houses, in a shaded area children with chapped cheeks were making a snowman out of snow gray with dirt and ash. I watched as they made the body, set a round head on top, attached two pieces of rock for eyes, and fashioned a mouth. I thought of the volume we were printing, which was also undergoing finishing touches: early next week we would attach eyes to that book, and a nose. I was seized by a peculiar excitement. Something was missing from the moment. Not people but work. And not just any work, but the work I'd started a few months before. Even though I was only an outsider doing odds and ends, I needed the work that I did at the print shop, with those three and no one else. When the children had finished the snowman, they shouted, "Hurrah!" I removed my muffler and wrapped it around the neck of the gray snowman, who had become quite the stylish fellow with his chopstick mustache. An had given me the muffler one evening when we were short of coal, pulling it from his overcoat and circling it about my neck. I turned away as the children burst out with another "Hurrah!" and I ran all the way up the hill.

I never was able to see that book finished. And I lost forever the opportunity to fit my cherished key in the print shop's worn-out door.

Finally, it was Monday. I left my room even before sundown. I could not show my face at the print shop just any time I pleased, and so, to pass the hours, I walked the long distance to work. This time I wasn't doing it to save a bus ticket: An and Chöng were insistent that I avoid encountering those who worked during the day at the print shop, and it wasn't difficult for me to imagine the effect such encounters might have had.

Call it fortune if you will, but I forsook my usual practice of turning down the alley that led to the back door of the print shop. As soon as the entrance came into view in the distance, I saw at once that everything had gone awry. The screen was up, the lights glaring, the glass door wide open. The lower half of the door was shattered; I see it so clearly now, as if in a close-up. Someone was inside, hurrying around. Outside the door, two men in suits, their backs to me, stood looking in,

smoking. My heart jumped, then felt like bursting. *Whatever you do*, I told myself, *keep calm and don't bolt away. Don't run, and whatever you do, don't panic; just cross the street. And for heaven's sake, don't look back.* I placed my trembling hands in my pockets, blended with the passersby, and came to a stop at a railroad crossing. The red light seemed to block the way indefinitely. It was already dark, and though I was no longer at risk of being spotted from a distance or pursued, in that short period at the crossing, the world seemed to become a den of treacherous informants. At any moment, I felt, someone next to me would cruelly grip my arm and whisper in my ear, "You're Kang Ha-wŏn, aren't you? Come along, and don't try to resist." I was tempted to look into the faces of those around me, but I managed to resist.

I crossed the street, slunk into the nearest alley, and came out on another main street. I reentered an alley . . . and when I had finally convinced myself I was far enough from the print shop, I started running. I have no memory of how long I ran or which streets I took. But as I ran I did something I'd never done before: from out of my mouth came something like a prayer, over and over again: "Dear God, let me not be caught here, so that no harm will come to my comrades. I have nothing to lose, but they do. They have much work to do."

A few days later I found out from the newspaper that all was lost: the materials we'd been printing for other organizations were confiscated, not to mention the book we had nearly completed. I read the names of a few of those taken into custody, but there were none I recognized, apart from an author who was familiar to me from my proofreading. As always with such newspaper articles, this three- or four-line summary of arrests and charges was tucked away where it wouldn't catch most readers' eyes. This did not mean that An and the others were safe. But if the names by which I knew them were their real ones, then their capture did not appear in the press.

Anxious days began. My chest pounded at the slightest sound outside my door. It was really very peculiar; it wasn't fear that made my heart pound, but rather the waiting and the longing. More to the point, it was the waiting for An. He was the only person who knew my address. More than that, his appearance one day might mean we could resume our work.

The weather gradually became moderate. I spent several days in bed. I had a temperature but no illness, and there was but one cure: sleep. Now and then my landlady quietly opened the door; she must have been worried. I think she wanted to see if I were dead. I guess I didn't want to disappoint her, for I kept perfectly still whenever she looked in. When my throbbing anticipation turned to resignation, I reached the limits of my suffering. I couldn't bear the certainty that I would never again have the opportunity to work with An and the others. I felt pangs of guilt and deluded myself into thinking it was my fault that their activities had been thwarted—that I had made a mistake and somehow alerted the authorities.

I roamed the streets. But there was no way I could make contact with them. Nor was there any trace of the few months I had spent with them. Well, there was that used-book shop in Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn. But it turned out to have changed hands. I also walked by the print shop. But the sign was gone and the shop looked as

though it had closed down ages ago. With no one to make inquiries of, and no place I could phone for information, I ended up back in my room, worn out. But even with a name or a number to call, what could I have done? I was still terrified that through some act of mine they might come to harm. There was no logical possibility of my seeing them again, but stubbornly I waited for one of them to appear.

Several nights later, exhausted though I was from trying to maintain my impoverished body, I woke and rose. I marshaled all the powers of my memory and began to send out signals for anything that could deliver me from despair. I opened the notebook on my table and sat down. Mobilizing all of my mental strength, I wrote down one by one the titles of the articles in the book we'd been preparing, essays I'd proofread at least twice. I began to roughly outline their contents, as I remembered them. My memory had mysterious blind spots, but just as often it put on an amazing display. Occasionally an entire paragraph came back word for word. During that one night I was able to reconstruct three essays, and the preface as well. There were eighteen essays in all, two of them translations. Of those two, I had helped out on one, and I managed to locate a copy of the original in the pile of paper I'd stowed away in a wrapping cloth. It took me all the next day, but I finished that translation. Afraid my resurrected memories would fade, I kept feverishly at my work with scarcely a thought of resting my eyes. A kind of prayer, I guess you could call it. Or perhaps autosuggestion, a superstitious belief that I could signal them as long as my memories were kept fresh.

Perhaps my prayer was answered, even though I was a nonbeliever, for around dinnertime I heard the plank door to my kitchen gently rattle. And then the voice of my landlady, "Student, come out—your cousin's here."

I sat still, holding my breath. My landlady's voice, now a murmur, continued from outside. I closed the notebook on my desk, then—and I'm not sure why I did this—I fished out my passport from the cloth wrapper and placed it on the desk. I calmly waited for my visitor to break down the door and enter. Then I heard the voice of a second woman.

"Ha-wŏn, are you in there?"

The gentle voice sounded like that of a close friend or younger sister. Still, it was a voice I'd never heard before. I instinctively sensed my visitor was somehow connected with An, the more so since I had no female cousins. I'm not sure what it was about that voice, but I felt as if my last ounce of energy had slipped away. Whether the owner of that voice that had called my name was the bearer of good news or bad, I unlocked the door. I received my visitor with an exaggerated greeting so that my landlady would hear and closed the door.

"My name is Kim Hŭi-jin. Mr. An gave me your address and said I should ask your help."

The woman sat down next to me on the floor, gathered her legs to the side, and slumped against the wall. She had with her a good-sized travel bag, and the hand that had set it down looked rough and knotty. She was pale, but no more so than I. Her face had a chilling beauty that made me feel she had come from a faraway place and would vanish to another. But her expression and general appearance skillfully

camouflaged all these things. Her eyes had a feverish glimmer, like the eyes of someone ill. We observed each other silently. For her this must have been a rare moment of repose. Finally I ventured a question.

“Is everybody safe?”

“Some of them. But our group is pretty much broken up. Everything we were working on was confiscated and everyone’s either in custody or a fugitive.”

“What about Mr. An?”

Kim Hui-jin’s expression turned to utter gloom and she closed her eyes. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

In a soft voice she told me about several people she knew. I had met none of them, and most of the names were unfamiliar. I wondered if An had told her anything about me when he gave her my address. But it was enough that he had directed her to me, and almost immediately I felt all of my doubts about him evaporate. In a spirit of deep trust, the kind you would find between long-time friends, she told me of the danger their group was facing. I’m not sure why, but I could not tell her the truth about myself. Instead, I let her believe I had belonged to their group for some time, and at her mention of unfamiliar names or names I had heard only occasionally at best, I put on a concerned look as if they were intimate friends. In fact, in my heart I *was* concerned about them.

After a slight interval I timidly said, “Whenever I heard your name I thought it was a man they were talking about.”

This seemed to remind her of something.

“Oh, I have a letter for you from Mr. An.”

Her tone had a certain uneasiness to it.

From her bag she handed me a thin, sealed envelope with worn edges. Instead of opening it in her presence I impulsively tucked it in my pants pocket and hurried out to the kitchen. But even there I didn’t open the letter.

I opened the vent to the concrete firebox and put the ricepot on, then cooked stew on the kerosene stove I’d borrowed from my landlady. It seemed an eternity since the aroma of food had last come from my drafty kitchen, and I found myself feeling jumpy. In all the time I had occupied this single room in Seoul, no one had come visiting. I congratulated myself that this first visitor was not my aunt or a relative she had sent. I sat down against the firebox and opened the letter.

Miss Kang,

This will have to be short. I’ve sent you someone as dear to me as my own self, along with a request for help. For the time being it will be difficult for you and me to meet. To get to the point, I have a very big favor to ask. Could you lend her your passport? It would be a great help. Because of the nature of this request, I’ll understand if you refuse. But I’ll say it again: it would be more helpful than anyone could imagine if you agree to it. If you do, I’ll leave the rest to you and Kim Hui-jin.

An

Short and to the point—a businesslike letter. I gazed at this letter. Had it really been written by An? It was certainly his handwriting. And did he have the right to ask me such a favor? Yes, he did. Why? But to this I had no answer. Couldn't An have phrased the letter differently? But no matter how he had written it I might very well have been hurt just the same, inconsolably so.

I returned with the meal tray to find Kim Hŭi-jin half-reclining. She sat up and received the tray with trembling arms. We finished the meal in silence. I had eaten meals like this a long, long time ago, silent meals taken late at night, oppression in the air, and I had cautiously observed the weary face across from me. On the other side of the table had been Mom, home from work, her fatigue camouflaged by makeup, and opposite her was myself, no more than eight or nine at the time. But Kim Hŭi-jin displayed a weariness different from Mother's. Her face had an unusual aura I hadn't recognized till then, an aura I felt she had perseveringly nurtured to resist exhaustion. I wondered if Kim Hŭi-jin was about as old now as my mother had been back then. No. Kim Hŭi-jin's face looked much younger. It didn't know how to age.

Whenever I thought of her after that moment, I was seized by a kind of persecution complex. Her face, her bearing, aroused in me something I had to find the words for. And there was nothing so difficult to define as her beauty. She resembled so-and-so, or she looked like such-and-such; no, she had something about her that such comparisons couldn't hope to explain. The only thing that occurred to me finally was the simplest of adjectives—*beautiful*. Was this the fantasy of a lonely, immature girl? Certainly it wasn't. Though I hadn't known who was calling me, as soon as I heard the voice outside my door hadn't I produced the passport for her? I would have sheltered her, or anybody else, letter or not. I was sure of it.

“You must have something on your mind, staring at me like that.”

I picked up the passport, which I'd pushed to the corner of the table.

“I've been thinking about what to do from now on.”

Kim Hŭi-jin reached across the table toward me. I took her hands without a word. They felt feverish. She gave me a slight squeeze. I released my hands, then enveloped hers with mine. I never asked about her relationship with An.

I sometimes wonder if this thing we call hope is a kind of narcotic. Whatever it is, the person who gets a taste of it ends up unconditionally hooked on it. Then if her hopes are shattered, she feels the hellish agony addicts experience when the drug wears off. And her anticipation of that agony makes her cling more strongly to her hopes. The day Kim Hŭi-jin came to my room I watched her weary eyes fall shut and woke up to the fact that I'd long been infected with a hope that was difficult to pinpoint. I knew that in one form or another it would end up guiding me for the rest of my life. Obstinate expectant that my vague hope would be realized, I tended Kim Hŭi-jin.

She was bedridden from the day she arrived. I nursed her in the evenings and roamed the far reaches of Seoul during the day looking for people who could help

her or provide news. But the addresses she gave me were wrong or, with everyone so concerned about the political tensions in the city, I was asked to go away and come by later when things cooled off. There were also times—not so frequent, needless to say—that certain people provided material assistance. In any event, though it was late in the game, I met many people who gave me strength. Through contacting these various people I was able to see Chǒng, who'd been passing anxious days at a tearoom run by a friend of his.

“Who is this?! How did you know I was here? Are you by yourself?”

Chǒng looked at me with surprise, more worried than pleased, as if it were my ghost he was seeing. All too clearly I saw in his expression the distrust that can overcome people under these circumstances.

Chǒng's suspicions no longer hurt me, though. What really surprised him was the news that Kim Hŭi-jin was bedridden in my room. Chǒng too was in seclusion, constantly fearful, and knew absolutely nothing about his friends except that An had escaped to the countryside. I told him the contents of An's letter and Kim Hŭi-jin's intentions and gave him my passport.

I wasn't sure what connection there was between altering a passport and working at a precinct office, but three days later Chǒng brought the passport back. He'd done a perfect job of replacing my photo with one of Kim Hŭi-jin. But Chǒng was afraid of handing it over to me and placed it in a drawer instead. We were in a tiny alcove to the rear of the tearoom and Chǒng was drunk as could be. The hour was late, but he kept trying to sit me down so he could rattle on with his griping about An. An had been interested in my passport ever since I started working with them at the print shop, he told me. It had all been planned. Yes it had, I told him—and An and I had done the planning; we'd kept it secret from the start. But Chǒng was too drunk to listen carefully to what I was saying. And he was furious that An was hurrying Kim Hŭi-jin off to the U.S. so that their problems wouldn't escalate. I waited for him to pass out, and when he started snoring just before the midnight curfew, I took the passport from the drawer and turned to leave.

“Ha-wŏn, I'm sorry!” he called out to my back.

I didn't ask what he was apologizing for and I didn't accept the apology. He'll never understand me and I'll never see him again, I told myself. I felt oddly emotionless.

Kim Hŭi-jin stayed in my room about three weeks. During that period she slowly recovered and at times she was absorbed in some kind of writing until late at night. When I had time I would sit beside her and continue the job of reconstructing the lost essays.

One night I awakened to a clattering in my kitchen. I opened the door and there she was, scrubbing away at the cupboards and cookstove with a rag. Like a true cousin who from the goodness of her heart had come to help her younger relation clean house, she had rolled up her sleeves and made the kitchen spotless. Hearing me, she turned with a sheepish laugh, like someone caught red-handed in a secret activity. But in that laugh was a hint of a deeper anxiety.

“Don’t worry, everything’s going to turn out all right,” she said.

By then she had regained a semblance of health. While I made preparations for her trip I vaguely expected An to visit. But that was impossible. The days went by without her ever seeing An or making secret contact with her family in the countryside. The day she left my room, left this city of Seoul, left this nation, she gave me half a dozen letters to mail and her bag, which was full of papers and things.

“Ha-wŏn, could you take care of this for me? It’s some trivial stuff I’ve written; when the time is right they can see the light of day. I’m sure I’ll see you again. And I promise I’ll be back.”

With the altered passport and the ticket I’d obtained for her, she left alone for Kimp’o Airport. For safety’s sake I couldn’t see her off there.

I spent the days after her departure at home waiting and preparing myself mentally for the arrival of someone, family or otherwise, who would carry me off to the police. But nothing happened to me. I finished reconstructing all the essays and read every last one of the articles Kim Hŭi-jin had left me, and in all that time no one came knocking at the door of my shabby dwelling. There was no doubt in my mind that Kim Hŭi-jin had departed safely. Hints of spring were evident, but endless winter was the season of my mind. Not much sunlight reached the neighborhood and the snowman still stood frozen upon the hill. A single postcard arrived, unsigned, bearing no return address:

Miss Kang,

Thank you.

And that was it. Presently I read a rather long article about An’s arrest, and then much later an article containing a commentary distorting and exaggerating the activities of my unnamed colleagues.

I always wanted to write something in the form of a short report about that period, starting out like this: “I can see it now, the gloom of early winter on that endless road! Darkness lay everywhere, like the dense color of a liquor bottle’s thick glass bottom, and yet it was then that I first encountered the word *hope* . . .” It seems I still hold sacred those thoughts we printed, but I lack the talent to record that period with any precision in writing. More to the point, there’s nothing in my existence that could be turned into a story. Who in the world would care about my life, which has been like a bar of the drowsy music An listened to now and then when he worked? An absurd idea.

Even if Kim Hŭi-jin had tried to make contact with me, it would have been impossible. For I myself left Seoul, telling no one. I dropped out of school once and for all, returned to my aunt’s, and for years I helped her with the farm work. At the same time, I ventured into other activities, wanting to share with those around me the color of the hope I had tasted. My life since then has changed little.

Meanwhile, An became well known as a folk artist and activist, speaking out in

the media. He gave several lectures in a city not far from the rural area where I now live. It's already several years since the one occasion I went to that city, around the time of one of these lectures. I asked the sponsors to give him a bag for me. Although I had highly recommended this lecture to the young people in the village, I returned home without hearing it, my duty done. In that bag were the materials Kim Hŭi-jin had left with me, along with the bundle of articles we'd worked on at the print shop, which I'd managed to reconstruct and hadn't read since. Later I saw some of those pieces in a magazine.

There now remains no physical evidence within my reach that this period of my life ever existed. I take that back. There is one piece of evidence: my unfinished translation of that book written in German by an Italian historian. But that translation has been stuffed away so long now that the paper has yellowed. And if there's anything to say about the book, it's that perhaps it's been published in a translation by a professional, someone better than I. I've never tried to find out for sure.

After that period I loved a man, the one and only time. But he left me to marry a friend of mine. If I had been him, I would have selected my friend, too. Several years ago I met a professor who had quit teaching and moved to the country to commit his life's work to writing. He was a linguist and said he was preparing a book called *A Treatise on the Sociolinguistics of Our Age*. He needed someone who could help him with sources and proofreading, and I went to his house and volunteered. I'm now his assistant and I go up to Seoul once a week to look up sources for him at the library. But I'm not at all sure when his book will see daylight: the expansive thoughts of this elderly professor only proliferate by the week.

I walked toward the station to catch my train for the countryside. How could the sky in this season be so innocently clear? And how could my suffering during that period be so fresh in my mind? Suffering knows no aging. I guess because our ardent desires to be healed are so fresh and persistent. Shall I gather the neighbor children this winter and build a huge snowman in the fields? We'll fit the head with a long branch, an antenna to send signals to the star of the woman who recently left this world. But wouldn't those children know better than anyone that a person doesn't turn into a star when she dies? Of the person who disappears in pain from our lives, all that is left in the hearts of those of us who knew her is a tiny scar of light.

TRANSLATED BY BRUCE AND JU-CHAN FULTON