

Ianfu

The wide eyes of the plywood walls
darted about the room.
The floor was dirt or looked
like dirt. Sprouting up, a single
piece of grass—or a grasshopper.
Then there was a bowl, blue
like the Pacific she watched
while living on Jeju
Island. In it, grains of rice
and the smear marks of a hand:

*...looked like waves hitting shore.
Who put them there? A girl who made it
another day or did not? Did it matter?*

She heard his zipper but watched
the bowl, felt his cold
calloused hands part her
legs as if opening a briefcase.

And then he was in.
And she did not cry.
And she did not wince.
And he would not come in her.
And he would not come on her

but filled the bowl
and left with his rifle.

Aisha, the Child-Bride of Muhammad, Speaks

My mother pulls at my wrist, pulls me
to the entrance of the house, wipes
my face and hair with water, her hands catch
in my tangles, then nudges me through
the door to a chorus of *Assalam alaikum*,
where the preparation continues—my mother
wrapping me in a white silk *jilbab*, in gold
jewelry. A wrinkle in a forehead
to my right, a crooked smile to my left
tell me I was chosen by Allah; I will be Mother
of the Believers. A woman of Ansar says,
You have entered with blessing and good fortune.

In the morning, I am a gift
they give to him. His cheeks are bright, rough
like sand dunes. Kneeling to peer into my eyes,
he says I am his favorite, that I will be a leader
of Muslim women. The eyes that stare
at me are brown, then gray, then black.
He lets me bring my dolls, and I am happy.

Nightfall and we are in Medina. There are no stars
to light the doll stories I make
with friends, but it is no matter; when he enters,
they scurry like mice in a barren landscape.
I try to place the doll on the ground,
but he wraps his hand around
my wrist—his fingers thick like dates—
and tells me to keep it. Scooping me into his arms,
I feel the scratching of his gray beard against my cheek,
and it is like I am hugging my father. He lays me
on our bed and takes the doll from my hand
to entertain me with a puppet show, teasing the lips
of the doll about my cheek, making us idol
worshippers in private. His hands move
like snakes, undressing us as I hold the doll
to my chest. He hardly fits inside me but *enters*
with blessing and good fortune.

A Cannibal in Onsong Prison Speaks

--after Hyok Kang with Phillippe Grandereau

A dog came back to town, bone in mouth,
and lay in the road, lavishly licking it,
skeletal frame heaving exhaustive yelps.
The people who watched him grew envious.
When my neighbor approached the bone, the dog
growled and then like us, whimpered and shook
as if to say, *I know you; and you, me.*
My neighbor halted, though from my sightline
he didn't seem to react to the dog.
And then a twitch of forehead, sweat dripping
from temple. He saw it charred—her small bone.

My wife left for China to look for food;
my daughter and I too weak to follow,
and all the while, the waiting. Days then weeks.
Her nagging grew incessant, torturing
our torturer: Hunger. She grabbed my arm,
her hands no longer eight years old—her touch
no longer human texture. My fist hit
her face and she smacked onto the concrete floor.
White foam and blood poured from her mouth, a river
into an ocean where the father drowned
in logical currents that swept away
compassion. She would suffer if she lived.
The animal I turned into picked up
an axe, shattered her skull, and found solace
in her limp-warm body. Hands of the father
who'd once dressed her when she was cold now peeled
the fleshy sleeves of her arms, fighting time,
the cold of rigor mortis. Several days
he ate, then burned the body in his stove.

In observance of our customs, he scattered
her on a mountainside, all ash and bone.

Execution at Yodok

-- after Kang Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot

The guards instructed us to pick up stones.
They brought him to the gallows at *Ipsok*
and silenced him, filling his mouth with rocks.
Before he even stopped writhing, we learned
the purpose of these stones, as guards instructed
us none-rebellious prisoners to pelt
his face and chest while yelling, *Down with dead-*
dog traitors. I aimed for no harmful place
but struck his shriveled penis, tore his foreskin.
The guards laughed. One tapped me on my wet face.
The rain came back. Wet from crying, I mean.
The bloody water washed around our feet,
making the others shiver while I beamed,
a child who found the ease in evil.

Fertile Soil

-- after Kang Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot

We came down from the mountainside
and smelled the stench before we saw
the bodies tossing in the air,

still clothed. The bulldozer made way—
our friends and family shoved along.
We could no longer bury them

on Yodok's hill. The guards told us
to grab the big pieces (the arms,
the legs, heads that lost their torsos—

torsos), to throw them in the ditch,
a pit not on a mountain slope
or hill, the customary places

for the Korean dead to rest.
My friend discovered his mother
in pieces and threw up in shock.

When he carried her to the ditch,
he made the choice—the only choice
he's ever made—not to come back.

I'm sure he's lying there with her.
A few days later, the hill's plain
lay ready for a crop of corn.

Those forced to plant it found toes, noses.
The corn grew well for several years.