

Variations on Darkness

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Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

Twenty-five. A precious age, even to my way of thinking. Dying at that age is something rueful. Lamentable. Yet on careful consideration, there is nothing particularly rueful or lamentable about it. Among the souls of all who have died in our land, vanishing for ever without trace with the word “death,” how many have departed without any regrets? Here I am in what is called the best age of my life, yet is it not the age when many soldiers die remorseful deaths, having been abandoned among the nameless flowers of a secluded valley? Nonetheless, I regret having to go, laying aside the words whose paths I have begun to discover and the jewel-like vocabulary I still need to find; the sighs of the flesh, doomed to rot, and the soul, destined to part from it and go wandering alone, are heartbreaking. But now, in any case, all that is left is my solitary departure forever from off the face of the earth. My eternal disappearance from this world is merely arguing as to the right moment. I had better try to persuade myself forcefully that there is nothing to regret, nothing to feel sorry about. Try to depart believing that. If meeting is what it is to be human, how cruel a thing leave-taking is, surely? Faced with the crystal-clear, certain fact of this leave-taking, I should no longer torment myself. Is not every life inevitably destined to die one day, once born? Where in the whole wide universe is a life that never dies? Is there a single tree with a life that, once it has put down roots into the earth and grown up toward the sky, does not finally take its leave? That vigorous undergrowth that sheltered the summer, withers once autumn comes, and even the tenaciously extended roots grow old and die, unable to defeat the winter, don't they?

“It can't take much longer. He can't last more than one hour now, at most. It's not impossible for someone to wake after such a long coma, but now the blood pressure and pulse are all but spent.”

Removing his stethoscope from my chest, the doctor speaks.

“*Aigu!* Towŏn! He says you're going, you're dying. Driving a nail into your wretched mother's heart, you're going. Towŏn! Towŏn! Wake up! Child! Towŏn!”

The voice of Mother, pounding in grief on the floor of the room as she weeps. Mother gulps back the sobs emerging from her. At that I truly wish I could open my eyes just once, like a lie. I wish I could open my eyes and see Mother, the familiar faces of those sitting around. Despite my earnest wishes, I cannot open my eyes. I am even deprived of the strength to open my eyes. It is mortifying. It is truly sad at my age. Desiring to live a little longer, I stopped smoking and drinking; I persevered as best I could, even resolving to accept the rampant disease in my tenacious body as a part of myself, as a pill of my emotional medicine, even to love and comfort it. But nonetheless it looks my life will be cut off here.

That most sorrowfully lamenting voice, isn't it Mother's? I don't mind the others, but I wish Mother would stop crying. This is the mother who, left a young widow after Father went North alone during the Korean War, raised and educated her four children by her needlework. To my ears, Mother's crying is especially heart-breaking. They say that a child who dies before his parents is guilty of great filial impiety. They say that the pain caused by debauchery, theft, imprisonment is less intense than that of watching a child breathe his

last Ah, I am driving a great stake into Mother's heart! I am driving into Mother's flesh a pain that, as she lies in her bed once I am dead, will blind her with tears, pierce her breast till blood flows. But Mother, don't be too sad. I've still strong flesh and bones so even though I'm in the other world, I'll acquire a good, south-facing piece of ground and build a three-roomed house. I'll have it ready to welcome you when you come later on.

"Don't be too sad, dear. Everyone who's born has to go one day, don't they? You're regretting that Towŏn never married and is dying a bachelor, but that means he'll take his leave lightly, since he's not leaving a wife and children behind. Stop grieving. In this late-summer heat, it makes living people fall sick."

The wife of my maternal uncle speaks from the edge of the wooden floored porch.

"*Aigu, aigu*, what destiny! My last-born child that I've always cherished, by what misfortune am I obliged to watch you set out before me? I never once behaved wickedly toward others in all my life, never was guilty of any sin; *aigu, aigu*, I have so much *han*. How shall I ever find relief?"

Mother must have left my side at some point and gone out onto the porch, for now her screaming comes from that direction. Mother is breathing hard in dry gasps. Another voice comes from somewhere. It's my maternal uncle, addressing someone.

"As he's unmarried, surely he'll be cremated. Then do we need to bother with the third-day funeral custom in this heat?"

At his words the sorrow I had previously been enduring patiently comes surging up again. At the word "cremated," I feel death come a step closer. In a flash I feel on my flesh the square space and thousand-degree heat of the electric oven in the flames of which I shall be disposed of at the crematorium. My skin torn away, detached scraps of flesh desiccated in a flash by the heat, hot tongues of fire pumping the sap from my very bones torment me, still alive. I am pierced by pain. More than death itself, that horrible cremation after my death frightens me. I want to live. Why do I have to die at this age? Why did my liver turn hard as a stone when I had only lived for twenty-five years?

Suddenly something seems to block the tiny holes of my heart, as it labors like a pump to keep breathing. Pain strikes my brain. Squeezes the brain's soft protuberances. Wrings it, squeezing out and scattering the moisture like a rag being washed. I swoon at a premonition that the extremity of such a feeling is linked more closely with death than the feeling of dying.

My life still seems to be clinging on. The crest of pain is passing. Once the wave has lessened, I summon serenity once more. Controlling my breathing, I breathe out hard. Falteringly, once again my gasping breath takes precious charge of the regained life.

"The first year, you know he applied to study chemical engineering in Korea University, in the college of engineering, since his eldest brother was in Seoul."

Sniffing, Mother speaks. Her voice suggests that her violent emotion has calmed to some degree.

"Towŏn graduated in chemistry from technical high school, didn't he? He graduated in science, so it was only natural he'd apply to enter engineering college, surely?"

My aunt replies.

"If he'd chosen a slightly lower level school, he'd surely have passed instead of failing. Towŏn spent a year boarding in his eldest brother's room preparing to retake the entrance exam. I reckon that was when he began to want to study humanities or the arts. Then how could we expect he would do well in science studies? But his eldest brother insisted on

the college of engineering, saying that it would guarantee a job after graduation, so the second was obliged to move down to Taegu and apply to the engineering college again. From that moment he followed in his brother's footsteps and took up writing. Started to frequent friends who were writers. Didn't he start to write, what was it, a novel or poetry? Going off at a tangent, the youngest failed again. That's when he caught jaundice. We should have taken full control of the disease and uprooted it completely there and then, but he seemed to have recovered, so we let it alone. Who would have thought it would turn into a fatal disease like this? And all the time going out drinking like a fish with those so-called writing friends of his Then he was called up for military service but they said his liver was already in a bad state. He collapsed at basic training, as he had abdominal dropsy, and was given a medical discharge after six months' treatment at the military hospital down in Chinhae. After that, he took medicine but it had no effect, then he himself said he was going to survive, and took extremely good care of himself for the next year . . . what kind of disease can be that harsh I don't know. Why does it not take my life, that has been fully lived, but instead is so intent on killing one in the full bloom of youth? *Aigu, Towõn*"

Mother's murmured laments were once again absorbed into weeping.

"If everyone who drinks a lot is supposed to end up like him, a drinker like myself should have gone long ago. It's all a matter of fate."

Uncle speaks up. He's a real drinker. For the past several decades he has downed three bottles of soju a day, pouring it into the cover of his rice bowl. Yet uncle, who runs a dry-cleaning shop, is still intact. Though he's thin as a dried pollack, he blithely goes several years without a single cold.

"It's all because of the war, you know. He's a wartime child, isn't he? The year he was born you were forced to flee south; after starving like that for several years, how could his internal organs settle properly and grow up strong? The newspapers say that the amount of nutrition you get in your first two years influences the whole of your life. He was so weak, he kept having nose-bleeds while he was growing up. That was because he was delicate inside."

Aunt speaks up. Her words reawaken Mother's grief.

"*Aigu, Towõn, poor Towõn!* He was born in the April of the year war broke out. In the October of that year we fled south, and it must have been in the spring of the following year, even with the children scattered here and there it was so hard to earn enough to live on that I hardened my heart and abandoned him in front of Taegu railway station. I hoped he'd be taken to an orphanage or nursing home. I left him there in the morning then, that evening, just in case, I went back to the station and there he still was, wrapped up as I'd left him. He was all shriveled up, too weak to cry let alone crawl"

"What's the point of old stories? I suppose he was still a suckling and if he survived, it was only because his fate was decided. Not a few babies died for lack of food in those days."

Aunt speaks again.

"Let me think, how old can *Towõn* have been then, three or four? I'd managed to find a room to rent, brought my daughter back home, found us a place to live. Before I started sewing, when I was still working at the sock-factory, still then there was so little to eat; I used to mix a spoonful of scorched rice with water in a bowl and he would drink the water so that he could gobble up every last grain of rice His limbs were skinny as skewers, his belly swollen like a tadpole's, yet he survived, didn't die He went bare-footed all the year

round until he began school, just had time to peep through the gates of the university everyone goes to, and now he's dying like this. Now that we no longer have to worry about eating three meals a day, God is calling you. How uncaring! God is uncaring too. He managed to endure until he was fully grown, and now look, he's at death's door. Those who are alive should live on somehow; if he's going to die at twenty-five, he should rather have died as a mere baby back then during the war when he didn't know anything, not at such a pitiful age. My poor child, dying at twenty-five, with all those regrets, how can he bear to die . . . ?”

Once again Mother choked and abandoned herself to crying.

I hate hearing Mother's lamentations. I've heard too much of her stories of hardships. Someone is laying a cold towel on my forehead, seizing my hand, straightening my shrunken fingers, introducing his fingers between them as they start to close again.

“Now his fingernails are turning blue and dying.”

Someone speaks but I cannot recognize the owner of the voice. That warm, soft hand nestling in my hand! By its touch, my body realizes how cold it has grown. When did the warmth start to ebb away from my body like this? Like when snow falls on still warm ash and reduces the heat hidden in the ash to icy sleep, my body is growing colder. My body now cooling like this will never grow warm again. This way death lies. I, this being who call myself I, will now vanish from the face of the earth. Grieving, I start to cry again. As I weep, I strive to keep that in step with my limited breathing in order not to upset the balance between the intermittent spasms of pain in the femoral region and my gasping breath. A few years before, no matter how much I might be panting after running hard, my breath would go merrily gusting down my wide open windpipe; now I regret the weariness of my pounding heart as I breathe through a passage narrow as the needle of a syringe.

“Doctor, can't he be hospitalized and operated on somehow? Save him, please, I beg you.”

That's my oldest brother's tearful voice.

“With today's medical science it is impossible to operate on the liver. In his present state no additional treatment would be possible if he were hospitalized. It's hard to say it, but you should be calm and just watch him die . . . If you call me then, I'll sign the death certificate.”

The doctor is right. My brother earns sixty thousand *wōn* a month working as an editorial assistant in a publishing company, there is no way he can raise the sizeable sum an operation would cost. Besides, the doctor said an operation would not work. So please, just let me be, brother. It's not likely that I shall regain consciousness, no matter how hard I wriggle. It's not just the liver, now my whole digestive system has stopped functioning normally. Whether they operate, or whatever else they do, in any case it looks as though there's no prospect of the vital energy returning to my body so that I can recover again. I gave up the last hope that I might go on living hours ago. If I could speak, I would like to ask them to let me die in peace, nothing more.

“I'll be going, then.”

The doctor speaks. He is leaving. Carrying his house-call bag, he is creeping out, to avoid seeing my departed soul with its disheveled hair. Doctor, please, stay here beside me just a little while longer. I won't beg you to save me, but don't go. I shall feel so forlorn if you are gone. Of course, doctor, perhaps, who knows? Like Jesus rising again at the end of a certain lapse of time, I might miraculously return to life. Or even if I cannot rise again, might

I not suddenly open my eyes? And even supposing there is no miraculous opening of my eyes, you could watch my soul's final departure from my flesh. I won't ask you to save me but please don't go.

Why is my mind suddenly in such a muddle? My heart abruptly aches as if about to burst. Pain engulfs my whole body. Pain squeezes every part of my insides. Now I must be dying. Death must be coming to take me, to snap with this kind of pain the thread binding soul and body, to snap the last string of the violin as the messenger of death, delighting in that sharp snapping sound, says: Now I'm going to carry you off. Once everything spread out around me like the ribs of a fan and I sat at the center, as the essence of my universe, but now that universe is rapidly leaving me like the ribs of a fan. This is the end. Goodbye, goodbye everyone. I'm going. I received nothing but love from everything, even from one indifferent stone, and now I am going without being able to repay that love. Forgive me, grant me leave to go. Intermittent darkness is ending, I am leaving, going into the everlasting dark, like a meteor that vanishes into the infinity of outer space, tracing a pale line. This pain will at last liberate me and grant me the freedom of no thought.

"Look. He's frowning. Surely his nose is twitching? It seems he's still in pain, even though he's unconscious. He looks as though he's forcing himself to endure the pain without crying."

"Towŏn, it's me, Suwŏn! Why are you looking like that?"

"Towŏn, Towŏn. It's Chaeyŏng, your friend, Chaeyŏng!"

"Elder brother, it's Tongch'ang, your junior, Tongch'ang!"

They are all calling out. My friends. Five or more of my friends seem to be sitting around my bed, together with my older brother and second brother. My second brother and some friends are weeping openly, other friends sighing, yet others sniffing; their grieving faces are vivid in my mind's eye. They are sobbing as they experience the true meaning of eternal parting, faced with my death, the death of a friend who is still in the age of freedom unburdened by marriage, the age that is still full of the pure ardor of emotion rather than calculating rationality, the age that is most susceptible to the solidarity of deep friendship. I am happy, with them around me. I am happy that God has allowed me such a moment at my last. This August midday is beautiful and precious.

Gradually, the pain disappears. My mind becomes far clearer. It seems the messenger of death has been testing me, poking my guts here and there to see whether it was the right time for him to carry me off or not. Breathing hard, I resolve to hold on; the messenger seems to have withdrawn for a time.

Beneath the sobs of my brother and friends, I can distinguish a rather more subdued sobbing. Surrounded by thunder and lightning, I hear the trembling song of a single little bird. Yes, that is Hyŏna's voice. She has not left, she is holding her breath over in a far corner of the room. I am sorry. As I have to leave like this, I feel worse about you than anyone else. Forget me. You still have a whole lifetime ahead of you; you must forget me and go on living. Forget me, please. No, don't forget. Even if I am dead, don't forget me. No, that's not right either. Hyŏna, you must clench your teeth, shake your head and forget me, saying: I don't know, I don't know any boy called Towŏn, I don't know him. Once you have erased every trace of me from your heart, you must live long years, breezing through this world like the wind. I used to love the wind, didn't I? The wind that has no shape, no shadow. The wind that goes racing straight ahead across the wild plains. The wind that stirs up the waves. You must pass through the world like the wind that sends the stirred-up waves to sleep.

That's how it is. I stayed up late many a night in front of an empty page, looking for an atmosphere that would allow me to bring the word wind into my poetry. Once I wrote Hyōna a letter.

After I had sent you away, telling you not to visit me again, before the sweat was dry in my rubber shoes, blood came pouring from my nose. That night a gale was blowing. The memory of your face was torn to shreds by the wind and vanished with the last scraps of night. When will we meet again? Though I vow not to meet you, my lonely ribs are waiting for you. I laid my dizzy head on the pillow and looked for stars through the window. No stars were visible in the dark sky. So I began to think about patience. The patience needed to listen to the meaning of a single wild flower, every unswerving gust of wind, the chirping of a summertime insect. And the patience needed to forget you and live. But why do I keep waiting in vain for you after our separation? I close my eyes but cannot get to sleep so toss in the dark with my weary bones, toss toward you like laundry in the wind, suspended in mid-air

In the end I never sent Hyōna that letter. Some ten days later you came to visit me again, saying the semester was over. So we met one more time, in a tea-shop on the main road in front of the house. You stared at me and said my complexion looked worse than ever. I was biting my lips and muttering to myself: My youth, which you were to have shared, has reached its concluding chapter. Four days later I coughed blood for the last time and lost consciousness. I was taken to the university hospital and regained consciousness but less than three days after that I once again fell into a coma. Once it was clear that there was nothing to be done at the hospital, they insisted I be sent home. There and then I could see the end of my life. My youth could see the period being printed at the end of its last chapter, last page, last line, last letter. Didn't you read the poem I wrote last year, "The man who's just pleased"? There was this passage about the wind in it:

Ah, wind!

When the frozen river melts
and the river's fleshy smell spreads
the gradually tightening
weight of falling flowers.

Foolishly

foolishly

falling forsythia,

and the daytime moon in the spring sky follows and falls

and the man who's just pleased,

well, let's see,

who could it be?

His legs are stiffening. They have grown cold up to the thighs.

"Look how deeply his eyes are sunk. When I turned over his eyelid a moment ago, I couldn't see any pupils, the whites of his eyes were all there was, and they had turned yellowish."

Probably all the other organs have stopped working, only his lungs are strong so he's still clinging on."

No way of knowing who's who. People are chattering around me. My breathing, that had grown quiet, turns into gasping again, without any pain. Now I have no feeling anywhere except the lungs and around my windpipe a thin fluid is slowly spreading. That black fluid

will end up blocking what remains of my windpipe. Yet it's odd. I can feel no pain. Nowhere in any part of my body. I have no sense of feeling left. I cannot even feel if someone is rubbing my brow or my chest. As if they were being anaesthetized, my flesh and bones are entering that state of anesthesia from which there is eternally no waking. Ah, so death comes like this, without pain. Being able to feel pain is a sign of still being alive, but now the end of pain, that's somehow not yet linked to death, allows the not yet departing consciousness a brief respite. At first there were many candles giving light bright as day to my whole body, then they began to go out one after another, starting far away until now all the candles are out except for two, one in my gasping lungs, one in that part of my brain that has not yet let go of the thread of thought, that are guttering as the last remains of wick burn up. As the melted wax rolls down and increasingly blocks my windpipe and consciousness, the last scrap of wick burns brighter.

But where am I going? Falling endlessly downward like this, where am I going? Flocks of bats flying with fluttering wings in rain pouring down like insane desires. Where am I? No. They're not bats. It's blood being scattered by a strong wind. Not bats, my skull is flying emitting a fearful roaring sound. Wailing fiercely as it flees, it's a ghastly pandemonium. It's grief, It's despair. It's the songs of evil spirits.

Abruptly I stop falling. Thanks to some power I begin to fly in parallel with the ground. Like a swallow. I pass rapidly through the boundless dark. A knife-sharp wind tears away scraps of flesh. Suddenly I glance down from out of the darkness at the world below. In that dimly visible nether world there are also rivers and hills, lakes of brimstone, sandy deserts.

I see rivers of blood where hosts of naked figures flounder wailing. People who in their former lives had many women and hurt them, people who violated other men's wives, people who tempted and ruined many men, people who became slaves to lust and committed all kinds of sins, all are floundering in the river of blood.

From the river's bank a steep hill rises. In valleys thick with thorn-bushes and poisonous snakes naked people are crawling toward the top of the ridge. Torn by the thorns, their legs wound about by snakes, forming throngs like maggots they howl for pain. They keep crawling up then sliding back in a constantly repeated process of trial and error. They were people who in their former lives were dishonest and always telling lies, people who harmed and beat others, people who committed murders, people who were viciously jealous, people who were sly and arrogant, people who loved wealth and money, people who knew no mercy or kindness.

Beyond the hill I see a great lake. Its fluid brimstone is seething, columns of flame rise constantly as if thrown up from volcanoes below the surface. In that lake of burning brimstone people reduced to skeletons flounder. People who abandoned parents and siblings, people who inflicted starvation and sorrows on their children, people who caused pain or who killed their own kith and kin, people who deprived others of their inalienable rights in life, people who loved injustice, people who betrayed their nation and the common good for profit, people who sowed dissension and fomented war, people who abused power and honor, all were floundering naked in the boiling lake.

Beyond the lake lies a desert. A crowd of people are staggering along in procession under a scorching sun. Collapsing from thirst, they continue crawling on. The procession is composed of those who have attained true enlightenment in the river of blood, the mountain of thorns and snakes, the lake of fiery brimstone, and here they advance along the way of

penance. In the desert, quantities of bones lie piled in heaps and roll about; eagles wheel low in the sky and quickly drop down to gnaw at the corpses of any who collapse and cannot get up again, leaving only bare bones. Clearly they lack intense repentance for their sins and therefore do not have the strength required to cross the desert.

Look how he's sweating, dear. His breath is weakening and a cold sweat is forming on his chest.

The dropsy seems to be growing more pronounced, too, doesn't it?

His body is drawing on its last reserves of strength now.

I hear voices faintly, far away. I cannot be sure if that hell-like world I just glimpsed really exists after death, if the kingdom of heaven or paradise, through whose narrow door only those souls can pass who have lived their entire lives according to the lofty tenets of faith, is something that truly exists. Suspended between life and death, I have probably simply been seeing an extremely dreadful form of the 'rebirth' that theists believe in. I cannot be sure if that hell is really the wearisome life of souls with many sins which I shall enter once I breathe my last, or if it is simply a phantasm produced by the close proximity of death. I am not a resolute atheist, I never used to believe in Christianity or Buddhism, then once I fell sick I began to believe in the existence of a God, but even that belief has not been secure enough to keep me from skepticism, especially when it conflicts with scientific credibility. If really my soul is to be reborn after I die, if that rebirth is really true, where will I go? To hell? To purgatory? I am not just being humble when I say I will not hope for heaven. So where will I go?

Now I cannot go on thinking any more. The pain that had been filling my whole body, poking into it like a weapon, has ceased for some time now, and I wonder where I am heading and what I have become as I linger endlessly like this.

Somebody is calling me. Now you have been freed from life's pains. Free man, come hither. Somebody is calling me. Now, freed of the last strains of consciousness, I am peacefully setting off somewhere. Like a ship raising anchor, borne on the waves I am setting off in pursuit of that dazzling splendor.

A breath of wind. The wind is blowing. A beautiful forest. The forest is intoxicated with the wind's songs. The forest sways. The leaves glisten. It hears the wind's songs through all those modest ears. What are those pretty birds called? Where am I? Where have Mother, my two brothers, Hyōna, my friends all gone? Who can have sent me here? Why have I come here? Did I come borne on the wings of the wind? No. Now my soul has turned into wind and come here. I have passed beyond my previous life and reached a new land. That marvelous birdsong like beads rolling. This is the first time I ever saw that silvery bird adorned with resplendent jewels. And it is the first time for me to see these flowers that emit a soft light like stars by night. Those gorgeous, rainbow-hued flowers like lilies, tiger lilies. This fragrance that makes heaven and earth tremble. And what is this sound? A sound is calling me, sounding like an organ only with more beautiful harmonies. I am walking in quest of that sound. Not walking, I am lightly flying. Like the shadow of the light sound produced by a balloon walking over a keyboard as it goes through some of the scales, I spend longer floating in the air than walking on the earth. From the sky above someone is watching me and speaking. Pure infant soul, you have been reborn into this world. You, soul who, though you were weak in faith, your heart was always sad; soul who suffered on seeing evil and was not able to call it evil; soul who were always humble when it came to loving life, soul who always hungered and thirsted after peace, now you will walk on this ground, live with us for

ever. Here there is no night and day. There is no need of sleep or food. Because we have no bodies, there is no distinction of gender. Since we have no bodies, we know no sorrow, no pain. All there is is goodness and truth, innocent as a child's heart. Why are you still attached to your previous life that only lasts a short time? Even if you lived till you were 80 years old, if it's a life full of sin, would that be a blessing for you? Henceforth you shall rest quietly here in sublime love and joy.

“Towŏn, Towŏn! Your breath is slowing down! Towŏn! As you were struggling, you said you would live, that you only wanted another ten years in which to write better poems. And now you're dying! Towŏn, I beg you, recover consciousness again!”

From far away, I can hear shouting and sobbing from that far-off plain. Now I really am quietly leaving this world. Goodbye, everyone. Once my shadow has vanished from the world, do not sing any more sad songs. I hope you recall what I wrote in an early poem:

Tomorrow's the day of departure
to my childlike eyes
I was the one who received more
what I leave behind after hesitating a while
is something like the shyness
that will sometimes come rising up.

But this is not an eternal separation for us. When leaves that were born from the same root quit the branch in autumn, there is no knowing where each one goes, and likewise we do not know where we go on parting, but after a little wait we will meet again. They say when leaves gather over skeletons, lose their watery hues and scatter, they lose all memory with time, but that is merely the lot of the flesh. We will know the joy of meeting again at last in the world of souls. We cast off one darkness and summon another and in the perfection of time, when that darkness is transformed into light, we will be granted the grace of reunion.

Ah, this world's final full stop arrives faithfully, and as I leave at last on reaching it, it liberates my soul into freedom.