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**Poems by Korean Children**

translated by Helen Rose Tieszen

In the International Year of the Child, it is especially appropriate to listen to Korean youngsters expressing their thoughts in poetry. The poems presented here have been translated from two anthologies of poetry written by elementary school children. The first anthology is that of Dr. Yi Chae-ch’ol, who has been long associated with children’s literature as a writer and critic. Over a period of twenty years, Dr. Yi collected children’s poetry from creative writing contests sponsored by Korean newspapers. He has written a commentary on the poems expressly for the Transactions.

The second anthology was collected by Yi O-dok, an elementary school principal of North Kyongsang Province. His collection of rural children’s poems was published in 1978 by Chinmyong Sorim under the title Ilhanun Aidul (Working Children).

As in all translations, lack of congruence in syntax and idiom produced special problems. An effort was made to keep the material in each line as it is in the original, but the differing structure of the two languages sometimes made this impossible. It was also difficult to keep the syllable count of the original. Several of the poems do have the same count in translation as in the original, but most of them vary to some extent. The poems in each collection are in chronological order.

The translator is especially grateful to her friend Chang Suk-in who assisted with the deciphering of the Korean material.

COMMENTARY

by Dr. Yi Chae-ch’ol

Chairman, Korean Children’s Literature Society

Poems written by children both influence and are influenced by education in the written language arts. Poems written by Korean children are no exception to this rule. With this in mind, we will first give a brief introduction to the educational history of poems written by Korean children and then discuss the main features of this poetry.

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During the dark days of the 36-year Japanese occupation, our national literature suffered from a total lack of education in the written language arts. The liberation of August 15, 1945 brought to Korean children the opportunity for education in creative writing. This opportunity was made possible by the Chosun Language Research Association (Han’gul Research Association) which published materials for the teaching of Korean language and composition. A small number of specialists in children’s literature and a children’s literature organization also published children’s magazines.

But the many children’s magazines published just after the liberation were almost an exact copy of the writing style of the Japanese occupation. The Korean War (1950-53) in any case interrupted these beginnings. Thus, they made little contribution to children’s literary education. The many children’s magazines published after the Korean war were mainly commercial ventures in the conventional, popular style; again making little contribution to children’s creative writing.

By the end of the 1950s, thoughtful teachers were groping for new ways of teaching practical composition. This led to discussions starting in the early 1960s concerning normalization of the Korean language and education in the writing arts. As a result of this full-scale encouragement, it was as if the bamboo were flourishing after the rain; individually and in groups, the creative writing movement gained momentum. This writing education boom resulted in a second reorganization of the education curriculum, which in turn gave impetus to professional research through such activities as the designation of schools specializing in the study of writing and seminars for teachers of composition. At the same time, education in the writing arts based on contests of various kinds became a stimulus to writing. But the intrinsic goal of a well-rounded education through writing went awry due to personal ambitions fanned by industrialization and non-professional conduct. The artificial cultivation of “tiny writers” led to a setback in literary expression. There followed a long period in which creativity and individuality in the expression of concrete life experience were impeded by a mistaken emphasis on making beautiful sentences without regard to content.

One of the greatest impediments to creative writing was the middle school entrance examination. Some relief was provided by an improved entrance examination system in the late 1960s. Further improvement was brought about by the third education curriculum revision of 1973 in which eighteen of the forty-one items regarding the teaching of Korean language concerned composition and writing. This represented a considerably improved condition for education in the writing arts. There followed increased[page 3] activity in criticism of methods of teaching children’s poetry, resulting in a lively writing arts education in which literature was distinguished from edu-cation.

From the time of the Korean War into the late 1950s, the teaching of the composition of poetry was heavily dependent on the rhythmic patterns of verse meant to be sung. In the late 1950s, some interested teachers and scholars of children’s literature began to try to effect a change from the set forms in the direction of free verse, but it wasn’t an easy task to depart from the rule of the song.

The poem, “Clock,” was composed in the modified traditional 7/5 syllable count: “Watering the Flower Bed” is a modification of the traditional Korean 4/4 syllable count. These poems are bound by rhythm, consequently lacking a feeling of fresh subject matter and content.

By the end of the 1950s, this trend had brought about a regrettable lack of expressiveness of child-like feelings or reflection of their daily life. At the beginning of the 1960s, this trend gradually disappeared, to be replaced with a free though naive portrayal of their life experiences and feelings by the children themselves. “Cho-hoe Sigan” and “Foggy Morning,” written by rural children, and “Harmonica,” written by a Seoul child, exhibit honest feelings and speech, dependent on their differing life, environment, and thought. These poems provide a peep at remarkably well-developed children’s poems, distinctly different from those of the 1950s. It was also encouraging in the last half of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s to see the flowering of a warm feeling toward nature, “beautiful eyes”(eyes that see beauty), and an intuitive sense. But this artistry with its reliance on native talent sometimes gave the feeling of being choked with a kind of decorative writing, lacking in empathy.

As seen in the poems “Fishing” and “A Voice,” the trend in today’s poetry written by Korean children has changed in the direction of the development of a healthy feeling toward life and a lively expression of honest emotions. This development has been entirely dependent on a stable family life and firm national security. An increasingly bright and energetic future for Korean children’s poetry is indicated.

[page 4] POEMS COLLECTED BY DR. YI CHAE-CH’OL

THE CLOCK

The tall guy and the short guy,

The fast one and the slow one.

The tall guy’s the fast one,

Ten plus two footsteps.

The short guy’s the pokey one,

Only one footstep.

1, 2, 3...

Going ‘round the stepping stone.

Yi Ok-hui, 5th grade, 1957, Sangju

A PATH IN THE SNOW

The gathered footprints make a path.

The footprints tell a story.

Crinking, crunching,

Every time I tread the path

A story is told.

A story of the Land of Winter,

A story of the Land of Snow.

Wherever I go

A story comes along with me.

Kim Chin-gu, 4th Grade, 1957, Sangju

[page 5] WATERING THE FLOWER BED

Watering the flower bed

Is lots of fun.

The sprinkler has holes

All over.

When I touch it with my hands

It’s real ticklish.

The flowers are tickled to death.

They laugh, “Heh, heh, heh.”

Im Sang-hui, 5th Grade, 1958, Sangju

MULBERRIES

Like mulberries, children

Hang from every branch,

“That one’s mine,

This one’s mine.”

Chattering like sparrows,

Between green leaves

Children’s faces look like mulberries,

Red chins,

Purple mustaches.

Ch’a Sun-i, 6th Grade, 1959, Sangju

[page 6] CHO-HOE SIGAN

Phew!

This long winded stuff,

I can’t stand it; this cho-hoe.

The sun is streaming,

My back is burning,

The stiff and straight lines,

Have all gone crooked.

Chong Kak-su, 4th Grade, 1960, Sangju

(Cho-hoe sigan: outdoor student-body

assembly for moral instruction and

physical exercise.)

FOGGY MORNING

Houses

And mountains

Playing hide and seek,

I play hide and seek

On the way to school.

Chin Pyong-ch’ae, 4th Grade, 1961, Sangju

[page 7] TAKING BABY’S PICTURE

Her head’s flopped to the side?

Straighten it up.

Her hat’s not straight?

Fix it up.

“Baby,

Hey! La, la, la!”

Bang!

“Wah,” Baby cries.

Kang Pyong-hon, 6th Grade, 1962, Sangju

(Flash powder is sometimes used in rural areas.)

BALLOONS

Red, yellow, blue

Balloons

Above the peddler’s head

Dancing, swaying, dancing.

A blue balloon

Over Ch’oli’s head

Dancing, swaying, dancing.

A yellow balloon

Above Puni’s head

Dancing, swaying, dancing.

Whenever the peddler comes

The whole alley turns into a many-colored

Balloon flower garden.

Shin Ki-ho, 6th Grade, 1963, Seoul

[page 8] HARMONICA

Harmonica

Harmonica

Second floor apartments.

Bright, sparkling

Splendid apartments.

Whenever the wind blows

The apartments, each in turn

Whistling its tune,

Splendid harmonica

Apartments.

Kim Yong-hye, 4th Grade, 1964, Seoul

DADDY’S SHOES

Daddy’s black shoes

Atop the doorstep

Sitting side by side.

Polished to a shiny gloss

Sitting side by side.

Friendly brothers,

Loving brothers,

Every day they go together

Wherever they may go.

Even when they take a rest,

They rest together.

Song Yong-nae, 5th Grade, 1965, Pusan

[page 9] SUNSET

Evening colors,

Pretty patterns in the sky.

Evening colors,

Leftovers of the fire in the sky.

Bright and shiny

Sunset.

In the evening, the sun

Goes away.

At night,

The sunset

Can’t be seen by people;

It must be hiding in the moon.

Yi In-ho, 2nd Grade, 1965, Seoul

GOURDS

Gourds

Intertwined

Atop yellow

Thatched roofs.

Big, round mother gourds,

Tiny, sweet baby gourds.

Split apart, this one’ll be a clipping gourd,

Split in half, that one’ll be a measuring gourd.

Gourds ripening bit by bit

Together in the autumn.

Pak Un-ju, 3rd Grade, 1967, Taegu

[page 10] ROASTED CHESTNUTS

“Roasted chestnuts!”

My ears hear

The call;

Mouth watering,

Roasty-toasty fragrance.

I turn my pockets inside out.

Finding not a cent,

I hold my nose, clamp tight my mouth,

And pass the chestnut peddler

Safely by.

Yi Sang-bong, 3rd Grade, 1970, Seoul

ALLEY

Kids used to play here.

Now it’s a deserted alley.

At night

Instead of kids

Moonlight plays under the street lamp.

Clouds floating in the sky

At times pass under the street lamp

And play with the moonlight.

The alley should have kids on it!

Kids should be playing here!

The lonely alley

Is kept by the moon

And guarded by the clouds.

Ch’a Yong-jin, 6th Grade, 1973, Seoul

[page 11] THE RED PEPPER DRAGONFLY

Many-colored

Newly clothed

Flower buds crowned by

The red pepper dragonfly

Sitting so quietly.

To catch it

I come up quietly,

Tip-toe, tip-toe,

Its big eyes already

Look’ round about.

Two wings whizz, whirr, and

Away she flies.

Sad to say,

Though I wait and wait

The pepper dragonfly

Comes near no more.

I’m so mad

I go ‘round back,

And there it is, alone on the washline,

Keeping watch.

Once more I try to catch it,

Tip-toe, tip-toe.

Like the wings of a jet plane

Up she goes

Over to

The laundry pole;

Playing hide and seek.

Chong T’ae-hyop, 3rd Grade, 1974, Kyonggi-do

[page 12] SUNFLOWERS

Wheel-like faces

Always smiling.

Even when insulted, still smiling.

Sunflowers: World’s Smile Champions.

Long-stemmed body

Always strutting,

Boasting of their height,

Always proud.

Sunflowers,

Long-legged kings among shapes.

Wheel-like smiling faces,

Long skinny bodies; proud

Sunflowers, always smiling.

Chong Yong-jin, 5th Grade, 1974, Seoul

[page 13] BIRTHDAY

Birthday,

Birthday.

I cried,

“Wah, wah,”

The day I was born.

When it’s my birthday

It’s an open feast day.

There’s fruit till I’m full, and

Cookies till I’m full, and

Soft drinks till I’m full, and

Rice cakes till I’m full.

There’s chicken till I’m full.

My birthday’s a wonderful day.

When it’s my birthday

I’m lord of the whole house.

Chong Yu-na, 2nd Grade, 1975, Seoul

[page 14] FISHING

Catching fish

Is really

Loads of fun.

The fish

Nibbles on the bait, and

Then the float bobbles.

It bobs and bobs,

and Then goes down.

Down it goes again

And comes up once more.

When the fish

Nibbles on the bait,

If you jerk the fishing pole

The fish jumps in the water.

Daddy’s catch came to fourteen,

Mine was all of ten.

Catching fish

Is really

Loads of fun.

Pak Hui-nam, 4th Grade, 1976, Seoul

[page 15] A VOICE

Crossing the railroad tracks, or

Going up and down the stairs

The sound of our mother’s voice

Seems to go’ round with me.

“Cross over carefully!”

“Be careful as you come and go.”

The words she said,

The sound of our mother’s voice.

My ears hear her voice.

Her fear that I might get hurt,

Mother’s voice,

That sound,

No matter where I go

It speaks to me.

So Song-min, 6th Grade, 1977, Inch’on

[page 16] THE EVEREST TEAM

On the white snow

All sunk, deeply sunken

Manly footprints from Korea.

On towards the world’s roof,

Our team’s

Forceful progress.

“Yahoo, yahoo!”

They’ll have called in a loud voice,

Touching the sky

From the mountain top.

“Hurrah for the Republic of Korea!”

They’ll have called in a high pitch.

Mount Everest

Is now no dream;

Our national flag

Waves from its highest peak.

Yu Hye-son, 6th Grade, 1977, Seoul

[page 17] POEMS COLLECTED BY YI O-DOK

OUR MOTHER

Our mother

Goes to the market every day.

Today, she went again at daybreak.

Our mother’s a lump of steel.

Kim Sun-nam, 4th Grade, 1952, Pusan

SNOW

Snow, snow, don’t snow!

My nose is tingling, my lips are blue,

My feet are itchy’ cause they’re frozen through.

My hands are ho-ho cold.

I need mittens!

Snow, snow, don’t snow!

Kim Song-nim, 2nd Grade, 1958, Sangju

(Ho-ho: the sound of blowing on cold fingers.)

GARLIC

Garlic hates winter.

In the spring, it laughs merrily and

Puts out its shoots,

But in winter it wants to cry.

Spring is a warm, happy time;

The garlic puts out its shoots.

Kim Sog-im, 2nd Grade, 1959, Sangju

[page 18] LUNCHTIME

At lunchtime

I remembered mother.

I’d begged her

For white rice,

But now I’m sorry.

My friend Chong-sang

Doesn’t even have barley rice.

She suffers the whole long day.

Yi Chong-hui, 5th Grade, 1963, Sangju

CLOUDS AND GRADUATION

There’s not much time before we

Leave this school.

When we graduate

We’ll go to a higher place,

Far away,

Like the clouds.

Kim A-yong, 6th Grade, 1963, Sangju

[page 19] MOUNTAINS

Under the far sky

Grandfather mountains stick out.

Under the grandfather mountains

Are the father and mother mountains.

They follow after the grandfather mountains.

Under all of them

Sister and brother mountains

Run along as fast as they can.

Pak Son-yong, 3rd Grade, 1963,Sangju

ELDER SISTER

Elder sister followed elder brother

To Seoul where she lives a housemaid’s life.

My heart is always

Wanting to cry.

Looking at the mountains from our classroom

They seem like Seoul,

And then tears start to fall.

Kim Chin-bok, 4th Grade, 1964, Sangju

[page 20] WHEN ITS SPRING

Won’t it be nice

When the sparrows twitter, “Winter’s gone”?

When it’s spring, I’ll

Go to weed the barley field.

When I go on to the buckwheat field

The sparrows will sit in the barley,

Pecking the ground and catching bugs.

Pak Hui-bok, 3rd Grade, 1964,Sangju

PERSIMMONS

I was found picking persimmons!

“Hey you,

Stop there!”

I ran like mad.

With two persimmons in my pocket

I ran as fast as I could.

I ran faster and faster,

Then I pulled out the persimmons.

Bright, yellow, sun-ripened,

They sure looked good.

Pak Un-t’aek, 3rd Grade, 1964, Sangju

RICE

There’s lots of rice. Rice spooned into a big bowl,

and rice dipped into a small bowl; looks like lots of rice.

I’d like to eat lots of rice. Even when it looks like lots,

when you’ve eaten it, it’s not very much.

Yi Chae-hum, 2nd Grade, 1968, Andong

[page 21] LAUNDRY

If you rub soap, it foams.

The foam comes up and a rainbow appears.

Yellow, red, blue. Such pretty colors.

When I scoop some out of the water, it’s so lovely

I scoop some up again.

Kim Yong-hwa, 3rd Grade, 1968,Andong

BLACK BIRD

The black bird

In the daytime

Stays in the stone wall.

At night,

Unknown to anyone,

He steals and eats

Food from someone else’s house.

When he’s full

He goes up the far mountain

To see the sky,

And then

He flies into the heavens, and

Dances with the moon and stars.

Chong Pu-gyo, 3rd Grade, 1968, Andong

(Black bird: a bat.)

[page 22] SNOW

How does the snow fall?

It falls, no doubt, from the stretched-out heavens.

When the blue sky comes down it’s snow, isn’t it?

On the ground the snow is white. If all the sky came down,

Why, we’d be living in heaven.

Yi Suk-ja, 3rd Grade, 1968,Andong

BUCKWHEAT

It’s a bad year for buckwheat, and

Mother and father had a fight.

Mother scolded, and

Father scolded.

Then mother said, “Even so, it must be cut.”

Father answered not a word.

My heart was pounding.

Kim Il-gyom, 2nd Grade, 1969, Andong

COUNTRY VILLAGE

Why live in a country village?

Why not live in the city?

It’s sad, listening to music on the radio.

I bet those people went to the city

And are making lots of money.

Why live in a place like this?

Kim Chong-ch’ol, 2nd Grade, 1969, Andong

[page 23] MY FACE

My face

Always looks like that.

It’s not different even for a day.

My face is ugly,

I’m even losing my teeth.

Even if I’m not good-looking

I’ll study hard and it’ll be o.k.

Kim Son-mo, 2nd Grade, 1969, Andong

THE SWALLOW

At grandma’s house

I saw a swallow.

It was the swallow’s first visit.

I called it “mundi.”

The swallow liked that, and

Showing off its wings,

It flew’ round and’ round grandma’s persimmon tree.

Yi Chae-hup, 3rd Grade, 1969, Andong

(Mundi: short for mundungi, leper, an affectionate

slang-term used between chums in Kyongsang-do.)

SUNSHINE

Sunshine always

Carries bright golden arrows

And guards the heavens.

Sunshine is good and

Laughs, “Ha, ha, ha.”

In its face is always

A happy heart.

Yi Chae-hup, 3rd Grade, 1969, Andong

[page 24] DEW

The dew on

The corn leaves

Is round

As a snail

Sitting there.

Kim Yong-ja, 3rd Grade, 1970, Andong

LITTLE CLOUD

Little cloud,

Why are you in such a rush?

All your life, you’ll never have a home.

Even if you’re famished, you’ll not be given

a spoonful of rice.

Yi Song-yun, 3rd Grade, 1970, Andong

ROCK

On the way to school, I tried to avoid a big rock

but stepped on another one.

“Today, I’ll have no good luck at school.”

But I decided to come anyway.

And then I missed two (on the exam).

Kim Son-mo, 3rd Grade, 1970,

[page 25] SLIDE

On the blue slide

Children

Dressed in red and black.

Fly like a bird

To my home town.

Chong Ch’ang-gyo, 3rd Grade, 1970, Andong

WILLOW TREE

Willow tree!

Start your sap flowing

I’m aching to play a flute

After school

On the way home.

When I’m bored

I’d like

To play a willow flute.

Kim T’ae-bok, 3rd Grade, 1970, Andong

FEEDING THE OX

Hey ox!

Over here there’s lots of grass.

Come over here to eat.

But that ox doesn’t come.

She does just as she pleases.

She isn’t even frightened

Of the owl’s hoot,

But she won’t go where there are people.

Kim Uk-tong, 3rd Grade, 1970, Andong

[page 26] PENCIL CASE

The pencil did its work

And now

It’s resting quietly

On mother’s warm lap.

Kim Sun-gyo, 4th Grade, 1972, Andong

MY MOTHER

Coming surely every summer

The cicadas cry unthinkingly.

Mother left me and went far away,

I grew up without her.

In each dream, “Mother,

Come back like the cicadas.

Mother!”

Im Yi-bun, 6th Grade, 1972, Mungyong

VACATION

After eating breakfast, I go outside, but

Grandfather’s coming back from the fields.

“You can’t go to school today, you have to work to eat, you know.

What’s all this playing around?”

I got really mad.

“In just three days it’ll be vacation

It won’t do not to go.”

Grandfather goes back into the house.

As I’m going to school with my friends, we’re talking:

“If we didn’t have vacation we wouldn’t have to work so much.

I just hate the word, ‘vacation.’

How’ll we do all that work?”

Kim Chom-sun, 6th Grade, 1972, Mungyong