

10 Poems, Dongwook Seo
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The Rainman or the Last Days of Li He

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The Rainman* or the Last Days of Li He†

In town was a young man who
At age twenty was already old at heart
長安有男兒 二十心已朽

Li He (李賀)

1

Ah, was there ever such a sad painting! The rain falls on a torn umbrella, and there he stands in a red shower gown by a little stream into which a frog leaps. He even borrowed his father's hat to look crazy. Chicken! Crane! Sakura! Full moon! Among these noble princes, is the unremarkable Rainman. Sadder still, for he is a prince to a throne that can't make any money. Thus unemployed, that means you must be a poet.

2

The actor in the rainy painting called "Sir Mad": was there ever a person who better portrayed Li He? I who played this actor was Hamlet. And I penetrated the Henan province and became the lunger, Li He. I was the field thick with reeds that Li He passed by on a donkey; I was the eunuch who, like the reeds, whispered in the emperor's ears the bureaucrat who plotted against Li He; God the father of the bureaucrat, the constitution; the servant girl who secretly doted on Li He. I was the citizen, sovereignty, territory of Tang; I was the silk pocket in which Li He placed his poems; I was the stepping-stone of the brothel that he frequented; Oh, this universe, all these failures were me, and

* The "rainman" refers to one card among the *hanafuda*, playing cards of Japanese origin. *Hanafuda* cards consist of twelve suits, and each suit is designated a flower. Each suit consists of four cards, usually two normals and two special cards. The "rainman" is a special card from the *yanagi* (willow) suit. The "rainman" card shows a picture of the Japanese poet Ono no Michikaze with an umbrella and a frog. Koreans play a popular game called Go-stop using the *hanafuda* cards, and in this game although the "rainman" is a special card whose status is at par with the chicken, crane, *sakura* and full moon, it has less value.

† Li He was a short-lived Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty. He was discouraged from taking the Imperial Examination due to his father's name. Li died a poor official at the age of 27.

3

The poet and the bureaucrat
The bureaucrat and the rich man
The scroll with a poem written on it and the ornament,
One is the madam
One is the lord
One is the madam
One is the old man
When touched, the grass proved plastic
The breasts were of silicon
The poem was plastic
The poet holds a golf club and
Steps on the plastic.

I was supposed to play this game;
Now just a ball of heat burning with rage like an idiot.
After overturning hundreds of tables where other people sat to drink
I borrow some taxi fare and return home.

4

The heart is only a loose black hole with no inside or outside like the eyes of a blind man. Inside there are no memories to cherish, no secrets to hide and keep. The person with an open heart is a drowned body with its once tightly shut anus open. With no strength to keep the sea out anymore, the primitive cell membrane tears at last and the body fills with water—Age twenty-seven. Name: Li He. He went to take the Imperial Examinations and like Hamlet, he was ruined because his father's ghost appeared.

5

You say I have to go to *baiyulou** to write? Get on the carriage, and I'll give you a new liver and lungs. Sure, you can continue to sit at the gambling table smoking and

* When Li He was drowsy, an angel from heaven appeared and told him that they had prepared a *baiyulou* (white jade building) in heaven, so the poet could write there. From this story, *baiyulou* came to be known as a word signifying that a writer's life had come to an end.

drinking, but the card you hold is a “rainman”.... Damn Heaven’s dealer! At the feet of a five-year-old at play, the shower gown is being dragged like the emperor’s cape, and the little stream trickles below the eyes Enough! Come back home with my hat, you bastard....

6

Therefore I shall be grateful for the sweet rain of time that extinguishes the fire of my youth. I shall be grateful for I will not have any more time left to live. Since the stormy days that used to get maidens pregnant no longer live in my penis, I shall now be at peace....

Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing

1

An angel stepped onto the railing.

He searched for words to leave behind, but

His head just jingled like a piggy bank and

Only strange words

Like error coins scatter all over.

Down below, the hotel's flags of all nations flutter like a mute.

“Ah, now

there isn't a single line that I can use!”

2

That summer

When the theaters showing double features near Daeseong Academy

All played *A Better Tomorrow*,

I had no interest in getting into college, but in order to see the girl,

I never failed to go to the academy.

Noriangjin:

A place I never want to go back to;

A place clogged with public buses, food stands and cigarette butts

Like the world's last drain;

A place with two double feature theaters at every bus stop,

If you sit at the very back, the seats look like the KKK lined up along the horizon,
covered with their white masks

What a view!

That summer

Each time the crackling rainy screen was interrupted

Beyond the masked chairs
Nonchalant to the cursing of the repeaters*,
The angel held out a pistol, and
As if to show how one dies a martyr
He slowly walked under the sun of the Kowloon peninsula

3

I thought about the men that the angel had loved.
Like the girl, who came out of the academy holding tightly to her friend, lovers who
fall short of expectations;
The theater lobby saturated with cigarette smoke;
Magazines missing their covers; the go board dented; the spittle spat distinctively
on the empty floor
Just as soon as the floor was mopped.
Why did I go there,
There, at that time?
Because of the girl? A little. And honestly, ever so slightly because of college
maybe.
But eight, no nine out of ten, it was really to think about how I was going to die....
He had to die proud with the blessing of the sun over the Kowloon peninsula,
But he knew that if he did not die then, he would never be able to die.
On the morning of his forty-sixth birthday,
He tried on the tie that the kids had given him for a present.
In front of the birthday cake, he ate well and shit well like a pig, and
As he happened to recall the boy sitting in the double feature theater
He was embarrassed
That the boy's childishness was his....

(For a second, the angel on the railing
Counted his age looking a bit surprised.
He was dumbfounded, it was unfair.)

* Students who repeat the college entrance exam because they failed to get into a university the first time. Many private institutes assisting repeaters of the college entrance exam are located in Noriangjin.

4.

After a long time, I met the girl.

She started to speak as if she had forgotten that I had liked her.

She was now a clerk who sat in front of a travel agency's computer, endlessly pouring out words. Be it Hong Kong or

Taiwan, I got to know how to get there cheap.

Really?

I replied and for a short second thought of getting on the plane.

While something in my heart vanished,

The image of the clouds floating over the Kowloon peninsula, for a long time just being idle under the sun, came up.

The blessed death that I missed

And I thought I heard the sounds of a very sad song from somewhere,

But I never remembered which movie the song was from.

5

The day the actor died,

Like nuns keeping vigil through the night,

The cigarette lights in front of the academies in Noriangujin would have lighted for a long time;

And the long line of public buses taking the mourners to and from there

Would have blocked the roads late into the night;

The drunken repeaters would have held onto bar doors and wailed.

Watching all these pitiful nights with extinguished eyes,

The angel slowly spread his wings toward the sky.

Like a pair of surprised eyes, the hotel windows opened wide and for a long time

Gazed at gravity's stunt.

A Refrigerator in the Middle of the Night

J'avais des conciliabules avec le Saint-Esprit:

.....

“Qu’ai-je donc, Seigneur, pour que vous m’ayez choisi?”

“Rien de particulier”

The Holy Ghost and I held secret meetings:

.....

“What is there about me, Lord, that has made you choose me?”

“Nothing in particular.”*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*

Half asleep, I saw through the crack in the door
My wife opening the refrigerator in the dark kitchen.
A sacred stream of light
Flew out, sprinkling gold powder onto the kitchen floor:
She’s finally found the main gate of the spaceship
That so many rumors had mentioned!
(Ah, she called herself the master treasure hunter in her junior high school days....)

A dwarf with a pumpkin head and Oreo cookie eyes
Slowly
Walked out of the refrigerator and hugged my wife.
“Yes,
Hiding among all the ordinary refrigerators,
We were able to dodge the Earth Defense’s radar and safely sneak in.”
“Wow!”
(Impressed! My wife brings her hands together)

* Translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman (George Braziller, NY, 1964).

“Listen carefully!

We have decided to save a pair of each life form on Earth.

Now in a week, this planet will come to an end.”

“Oh!” (My wife is surprised.)

“Why?

For no reason.

A drunk Bebopalula (Poet’s note: A space bear the size of Texas)

Is going to fly around and collide with Earth.

You call these things rotten luck, don’t you?

There is no reason....

But you were chosen!”

The dwarf alien zealously moved his gills

And imitated a human voice,

Which to them was some sort of weak signal

Used in vulgar board games.

“A pair?

Then what about our children! My mother?

Are you taking just my husband and me?”

“Your husband can’t come, neither can your children.

The fanatic obsession with booze and women, salty food, cigarettes, trans fat, and the night life

Has ruined his innately inferior body.”

(He had lived like a king.)

“He won’t be able to endure the long journey.

The frail kids he bore have repeated recessive inheritance and

Will again breed a corrupt race.

They will be the progenitor of a lesser kind than the current earthlings.”

“Oh!” (This time she really seems a bit disturbed.)

“Instead we

Have chosen a devout man for your ideal mate.

He is a man called Boy George,

And singing is his vocation.

His vocal cords are so superior
That they slightly resemble our gills.”

(Darn! Of all people....)

Hesitant,
My wife bites her fingernails.
(At last a light, at least once in a lifetime!
So this is how a mission to save the human race is given.
How long have I wandered through this refrigerator searching!
Like men’s elegant alien,
I had leaned on the refrigerator and plagiarized a flyer.
That moment, I knew by intuition that this product would bring me
A special life.
Oh the days! How pathetic they were! It’s now goodbye.
I do worry about Boy George though....)
At last, as if she had made up her mind
My wife makes a gesture as if to grab the water bottle and
Sticks her head into the refrigerator.
(That woman!....)

Like the split second before ignition
Silence and darkness cover the living room.

Alien Lover

I, a legendary plastic tycoon, will sometimes put my grandchildren on my lap and once again tell a story. “Your grandmother was devoted; your mother was smart; the Namdaemun burned down in a blaze.” After abruptly telling these stories to cover up stories, I will at last take out an old cell phone and read them the text message from a lover who visited me from outer space. “If you’re having a hard time, what can I do except pat your shoulder to cheer you on.” “It’s got appeal. It doesn’t sound like an old woman over two hundred years old.” My oldest granddaughter, who is smart, will be excited with her eyes twinkling. “Since this was when I was in high school, yes, she was exactly two hundred years older than your grandpa.” And I will take special care on the most important part of the story, one that I told all the time. “Her skin was really lovely. Her skin was specially recycled from synthetic resin, so you couldn’t believe her to be two hundred years old. It was a victory for alien science.” Soon the story will reach the saddest part. How she cried with the Earth’s sea in her eyes, thinking of her fellows; why she, a senior in charge of water resources, had to go back to her star that was at war. The children patiently listen to the political story as well. “Since then your grandpa started studying about synthetic resin. I’ve held every rubber ball in this world. Ardently I wanted to find her skin again. I couldn’t forget the touch of that synthetic resin when we embraced and lay together in motel room after motel room.” “Father, what are you telling those kids!” Once again my daughter-in-law rebukes me, but I don’t mind. “‘Stop wandering the streets at night and go home,’ she said. And making a long pillar of light next to the Gyobo bookstore, she left driving a public phone booth. I have felt every kind of plastic in this world. Eventually I became the top expert in the field of synthetic resin, and went into the arms industry. Thanks to that the human race went through two wars with plastic toy hammers leaving only slightly bruised casualties. But I never again felt the touch of that skin. Earth’s synthetic resin technology is behind by two hundred years. No one can live until then.” Has the war ended? Has her star been liberated? If I leave this world and roam space for two hundred years will I be able to meet her again? If only I hadn’t even started!.... Then I carry my grandchildren who had long before fallen asleep and lay them on their beds, go up to the top of the company building and I call

out your name towards the Milky Way caught on the transmission tower. After I call out your name three times, it sounds like the name of a star.

Song of Parting

I text, “I put your name on my tongue as if it’s a pill that will save my life.” “Then that makes me the druggist, right?” you soon reply, gently avoiding an answer. Then, as if gazing at a life expiring inside an incubator, we stand before the sparkling window in each of our rooms and smile vaguely. “Don’t follow me, this is the way to death,” you say, while you lightly walk across the cliff. I pray that I may become the sunlight, wind, rain shower that crashes into the cliff so I can continue to play with you. I pray that I may become the bird’s egg that you delight over when you happen to find it in the grass. “I am going to die. Go, return to your family, you dog!” After you hold my front legs and shake them, you pet me several times between my two alert ears. “That’s enough.” When I open my mouth, the words don’t come out. Just the voice of a four-legged animal whining. In meeting or in parting, the tail knows no other expression but to shake unvaryingly; it is by force of habit rooted in this animal’s body. But you leave behind a smile fresh like an open bottle of soda in the sun, and disappear beyond the cliff.

Candy*

They call her Candy. They say her bleached hair curled like a lion's mare is actually blonde. Marriage isn't worth going through twice and the body that she's been on bad terms with for forty-two years is not a house anyone would want to continue to live in. And Candy returns from work and waits in front of the telephone (But for what?). "In the winter, I went to the hot springs of Beppu, in the fall I visited the ruins of Xian... the tomb of Qin Shi Huang alone," she writes on a postcard, while the tour guide takes her to the airport. "No matter how I worry, my cheeks droop and my waist gets thicker. So what if I have everything in the world? I can't make a young child do as I want..." (When the emperor leaves his place, the young toys in the palace giggle and make love together. I think I should stop chatting with the young ones online, stop having sex in the karaoke, and stop giving money to the girls, too.) Then she thinks for a moment, but leaves the address blank. The runway disappears in the rain, and it's a life of trudging through the duty free shops of East Asia with a plastic shopping basket. But even the luxury items are in low spirits and can't cast a spell. As soon as she returns home, Candy, looking determined, challenges the mirror with its head down and shows a splendid smile painted on a golden mask. She paints numerous smiles, just as the mirror has styled for her. "Smile. Smile, Candy, a girl like a wild rose."[†] "Yes, it's this smile," she is determined to remember, and after sniffing the scent of the perfume she bought at the duty free shop, she lies down in her bed. While darkness secretly looks on, a girl who looks familiar suddenly laughs out loud like a rich person who owns eternal time. Candy, who was observing this dream, almost mistook this disproportionately big face turning pale with happiness to be Candy.

* *Candy Candy* is a Japanese animation series that aired on Korean TV in the 1980s. The main character, Candice "Candy" White Adley is a girl with long curly blonde hair.

[†] These words are from the lyrics to the theme song (Korean version) of *Candy Candy*.

Nature of an Error

The lord hears the sound of the rampart collapsing.
Each time a spear pierces and hurls a young soldier
A terrifying scream
Escapes from their young bodies.

He is embroidering.
While thistles have been covering his land these few years,
The crest of the royal family in which the snake is tangled with the dog
Has been emerging very gradually
On a piece of red silk.
He is embroidering.

The soldiers ascend stepping on the bodies of maids and cooks, and
As they raise their torch
His flags that coiled upwards burn.
He is embroidering.
When the fire begins to scorch the graves of the queen
And the princess who died young,
The mistress who anxiously kept her place under the dark candlelight
At last lets out a sigh.
“My lord!
The opportunities to prove that the noble courtesy of the old ministers
Was nothing but an evil conspiracy
Were as plenty as the numerous nights.
With your trivial loyalty and complacent compromises,
Those nights are long gone.
The daffodil now withdraws its petals
And before our eyes, it is now summer when all things are born again;
But you couldn’t grow anything, could you?”

He is silently embroidering.
While embroidering, he thinks of one autumn at the palace.
The wise men interpreted the stars and musicians
Wrote and performed songs that moved one's heart.
The ministers were wise and the ladies were virtuous;
And the rites offered by the priests pleased the god.
The dreadfully long struggle with his brother
One day made him the only survivor in his family; and
The woman he took from his brother barely made it through a few winters.
Should we think that punishment talks to us through coincidence?
The princess sitting in the wheelchair
Followed what she felt to be right: she reached out her hand to gravity's temptation
And rolled the wheels down the stairs.
One moment,
Just as an ancient germ awakens,
He had a change of heart.
A foreboding of a curse confused him, and
He hesitated; then
With an expression that seemed to say nothing was wrong,
He circled and eyed the hallway where the masks were stored; afterwards
Pretending not to know anything,
He covertly threw away
The chance to forgive himself.

"The bell tower is engulfed in flames.
My lord!
When the queen asked me, a mere courtesan of the court, to look after you,
I mounted your bed, unable to give any answer, for
My lips were frozen from what I had seen in your eyes:
The burning islands that drowned and
The fear.
I let your revengeful spirit pass through every corner of my body.
Revenge, isn't it funny?
There was never anything to avenge;

There were only those that died away—until
You were old and tired—
Like a crock in which juice slowly wells up, filling the skin with screams.
The duty has been done!”
And out the window where the long spears stand erect
She hurls her own body.
He is embroidering.

Amidst the songs of joy sung by the people far away,
He is embroidering.
A malformed snake and a sick dog are tangled together.
Their tired eyes saying, “I want to die, I want to die,”
Are like the last drop of semen in this family:
Murky and dull.
At last the elaborately decorated door breaks into pieces,
Which sail with incredible speed;
A knight on a horse enters and
His tall helmet smashes the chandelier on the ceiling.
When the knight’s long spear tore his heart from behind his back,
An emotion like the ruby that decorated the snake’s tongue was ablaze
In his eyes where the world was setting.
While he tried with all his might to call out a name,
All the untold stories in his body were unable to find an exit;
Thus the lord’s body looked like it was empty inside, and it
Slowly tore the incomplete crest
And toppled
Into hell.

Obstetric Ultrasonography

Under the ground wherein an old grave lies
The transducer enters.
In the sonogram, like life's negatives,
Death is first.
Inside the grave
The small remains of a single being turn over.
The remains are not happy with the life that suddenly possessed them.
This life entered through the spine, moving the heart;
It continued on to the brain; thus making the boring thoughts begin;
At last it made blood flow through the bent legs,
Occasionally making the knees go numb: This life is
Hard to bear.
"This is the sound of the heart.
Isn't it amazing?"
As the doctor raises the volume,
The remains, angry because of the life, let's out a beating sound,
"Please don't disturb a dead person's rest!"
Rattling at every joint because of the heart,
The remains in the small grave
Put up a hopeless fight against life.
Then one day,
Holding a white flag, it is chased out of the opening body;
Driven to a point when it is about to drown in the air flooding in so strong its lungs
burst,
The remains give up all dignity
And scream
Disdainfully
For the return of death,
The death so tight in its hands.

Thought

People spend their evenings eating *guazi**.
When it comes to these Chinese nuts,
First you have to hold the nut well.
You hold the thick side, not the thin side of the shell up and bite with your teeth;
Then a thought starts to sink in.
Is thought truly done with the teeth?
When the shell breaks,
A person returns and
Secretly admits to some mistake and
They are tired of the Earth.

Thought,
Should they think of it as a token of the soul?
If the brain tissue consisting of fat creates chaos in the circuit,
An electric shock occurs, so
They are always afraid of the next step.
What is thought?
Something that doesn't let the meat, fat and bones at ease.
He thinks of something from long ago: it's all past.
But because of this thought, once again he sends a short text message.
"Should we give it one more try?"
It's only a thought. The fat should stay still.
The blood should not quicken and
Thump thump
Like the tennis ball hitting the wall,
It should have weight, elasticity, habit and rules: in other words character.
This splendid exercise, thought completely ruins.
Come to think of it, a text is truly thought.

* *Guazi* literally means melon seeds in Chinese, but is often used to describe the various seeds that the Chinese enjoy as a snack. Mostly consumed are sunflowers.

(The Chinese who invented letters always admired the writing.
The writing is a thought
That brings death to its writer in the end, after
The muscles of a person unable to walk, who can no longer do the exercise, are
At some point stretched because of the battery. When he presses his cell phone, like
one of China's master calligraphers, he closes his eyes
Tired from thought.)

Ptooeey ptooeey
When it comes to *guazi*, the way you spit the shell
Is more important than eating the meat.
It should be vulgar,
Dirty, and
In a word, disagreeable.
Just like when you roll tobacco and smoke it without a filter, ptooeey.
Then is the shell a thought?
It looked more like the root that wasn't completely pulled out
Rather than the shell of a nut.

Winter

The room is full of dust.
Would you come?
While the frozen branches break
Without anyone's help, because of their stubbornness,
The light bulb monitors the dust, and
Would you come?
Winter is a wall made of dust.
Winter is. You probably won't come;
I don't even care to
Ask if you'd come, but
It is important to be the first to ask.
Realizing that a trivial bickering is everything in life.
Like a high school girl who writes on her blog,
"You should harden stubbornness and complete it like ice;
Waiting for spring to come and melt it is negligence."
Just like hardened cheese, winter is winter.
We don't do anything and
Just like the drying cheese, the dust is all too salty.
(Fresh air is out of the question,
The mind that is being completed like hard-boiled eggs will wake and seep away.)
With the exception of the ceasefire while I briefly go to the store
My body wrapped up in duck down,
I am in the center of the hot dust.
Like well preserved *pu-erh* tea, winter is
Hardening into one mass of dust.