

## Cheonggyecheon

A response to *Miracle on the Han River*

An army of horses greets you. How many there are – though there have been more – and how neatly they march. When you have walked a little way you will stop and turn, wondering whether each horse and rider is different, or whether you have encountered merely a procession of copies. You will want to know how long this took, how much time this was worth and to whom. You will walk some more, contemplating this and other armies, and then you will turn the opposite way – towards me.

See how artfully I am arranged? I have been given new shapes to wrap myself around, new directions, new forces to work with. I drop in clean thin strings, a sheet of strings. I tumble and fizz and grow white and fluffy. I forget myself and stay forever amongst the still rocks and we become partners in crime. I flow on. You will want to cross now for I have been arranged that way. But I am wet, and so you will turn and continue walking beside me, looking ahead now, and you will notice for the first time that you are not alone.

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Feet enter us. We make room. Two slow feet. We settle warmly into their cracks and callouses. We lap at their bruises, we sink a little into their scabs, befriending the loosest cells. We wait. Here they come. Two hands, two busy hands bearing pliant stuff. White cotton, a *jeogori* shirt. It enters us and we enter it. It is heavy but we are heavier. It is twisted and turned and vigorously rubbed. It complies, for it is versatile, and we make room. Two tired hands dreaming of gold and purple silk and ramie, stirring us up with a flood of cotton whites.

Like all our visitors the cloth brings countless guests. Microscopic guests, parasitic guests, fickle guests. They willingly part company with their host. We invite them to stay and many do. After all, we have plenty of room. Some settle lazily on our beds. Some drift, insinuating themselves as the fish do within the folds of our body, here and there altering our scent, our mood, our colour. Indeed, *we* are denied no riches, and have on other days lured from other fabrics hints of indigo, safflower, gardenia, maple, pomegranate. So long as these guests surrender to our ways we will always make room.

Two smaller feet want to play. We'll play. Down they crash. We make room – we make lots of room. Little feet stomp, we swing. Little feet kick, we whirl. Air-bound, we multiply. We separate ourselves, we fly apart in formation, we become fighter kites in a mid-winter gale, stones in a *taeggyeon* battle. We scatter, we vaporise. Little feet tire quickly and so we must reform. Winding down to our own rhythm, swaying as we resort to unity. We rest.

All along our sides, feet. They have been coming and going, with their hands and their stuff and their friendly guests for years. Sometimes there are different feet, in fours, bringing livelier, zingier guests and piles of dung. But mostly it is twos, and cloth, and some that want to play.

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The wide path's ruddy tone puts you in mind of certain deserts, but I am verdant. Greenery springs from my springs, seeps out over the dry red path, climbs my cobbled wall and proliferates along the terrace garden with its jewel-like signage before seeming to climb higher still. An outcrop of nature bearing my tonics slowly skyward.

And there you stand, trapped between a single baroque deck and a repeating grid of juliet balconies. What *is* the way here? Back toward fogged-out buildings, joining microbial activity behind those purpose-built walls? In with me, befriending amoeba who find you most pleasing? Following the white arrow down the blue wall, scaling LeWitt's skeletal scaffolding, counting greys as you cross the bridge out of here... all the way out to my delicate arched bridge and a fresh gush of greens and greys and hards and softs and signages? Come on. Give me your feet.

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Today we are a rainbow of yellows and browns. A mobile feast of grit and sludge and mud and slime. Piss and shit and blood and tea (the not-drunk and the drunk) and spit and slops and skin. All these gifts we receive. Stubborn globules drifting in upon acid streams careening through channels once forged by a thousand fish. Each clutches its own texture and dynamic and they whorl in fine symbiotic forms for a while. But solubility always prevails. Sometimes an avalanche of waste-forest buries the lot mid-undulation, pinning death throes to our floor beneath the heavier invasion of earth and sand and ash. Another slug of charred logs anchors down the alluvium.

These sediments are so many but compared with the company we used to keep, the societies we once were home to, their constitutions are base. They are already broken when they come to us. They are readily absorbed. Or is it we who are absorbed by them? We, they, are an experiment in the classification of weights and consistencies. Our liquids rise, our solids sink, we are neither liquid nor solid. Our floor becomes indiscernible amidst our infinite gradations of decomposing matter. Our more complex lives choke and depart. We are simple and deathly still.

And so we are dredged. 400,000 feet bring hands and tools that scrape away our edges, removing the walls we know, stretching our sides apart. The sweeping edifice we have made of their gifts they dismantle, they stir up what we have settled, they drag away our solids and our stillness. We are sluiced, our channels opened, they want us awake. They redisperse our cells, they evacuate those brave ones yet attempting habitation in our depths. Our firm beds are reinstated, we are to discern

and to navigate, to be mobile and fluid again. They inject us with life, longevity, renewed survival instinct. We follow their lead and groan and turn and lie back. We test these raw beds, rediscovering our edges, gingerly making room.

And now we are strangely surrounded. Our warm sides of mud we can't find, instead there is hard, flat stuff: all along our sides we know just where we end and this other stuff begins. So instead we reach out to the creeping willow roots and they reach out to us, they share our sharing ways. And though our sides ache, we begin to move again. We will take any house we are given.

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Well? What use have you dreamed up for me now? Noting my shallowness, will you lie down one night with a wet back and a dry front and wait as long as it takes for the yellow dust to clear and a star to peer down at us? Will you shiver willingly to wait with me for such a sight? Or will you ascend, with your spikes and ropes and your blaster, one of my more recent ruins – a decapitated highway-pier, your island fortress – to keep vigil for surviving life forms, or, none being forthcoming, to count the vacant windows of industry? Will you entertain the ultimate ascent, up the red ladder to red heaven? Will you scoop a Crucian carp or a catfish from my ever-pure waters and crunch it between your teeth, returning only the bones to my care? Will you return your own bones to my care?

You will, I know, be drawn to my red bridge. You will skip across my shiny stepping stones and as you do I will throw red light back across your face for an instant – or longer, if you pause to gaze into me. You will bound up the steps and the stairs, because that is clearly the way. You will run out onto that crisp, perfect, red bridge and – mingling with the courtiers of the passing king's retinue, with the lotus lantern revellers, with the bridge trotters and kite fliers, the moon watchers and the *jeongisu* story-tellers and the superstitious folk seeking immunity to disease – you will run out and though you know just where you are going you will halt and look down, transfixed once more by my smooth, sure flow and the bright reflection I am offering you.

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400,000, 600,000, more. The feet and their things keep coming, growing slums and vegetables on our infected shores. Shanty houses and shanty shops creep along our banks. They dig caves in the great mounds of dirt dredged from us long ago, and live in them in gangs, selling snakes. They burn more trees, throwing us more scraps, more logs, more ashes, re-clogging our passageways. The mountain, our provenance, they strip bare. Rootless, crumpling, it crumbles into us, a sad, cool lava of earth and sand. They rename us, *Cheonggyecheon*, 'the clean stream', though no one comes to dredge us anymore. Our guests keep coming too, until we are thick and swamped with wasters wanting free carriage. And carriage we give, though we are

viscous and our perkier friends no longer drop by. Once again we are a slow flower with a murky load and the permanent whiff of danger.

So, having nowhere to go, we join forces with the rain, the summer, the monsoons, the river Han, the Yellow Sea. We rise up, pouring their excretions back in through their windows, giving back their gifts and taking others, taking their gardens, taking their huts, taking their little feet for keeps. Again and again we escape our walls. Again and again we, the rain, the summer, the monsoon, the river, the sea, we rise up, offering permanent passage to all.

Until they cover us. For cover us they do. *This* gift we have not received before, though we have dried up before and perhaps this is just a longer, more lifeless spring, a crueller autumn. Our body, our bed, our sides, our length, our teeming guests, forced underground. Gradually buried beneath a concrete mausoleum. Something immeasurably heavy takes our place, swamping us. We gain an imposter's shadow, a harsh, foreign whisper leaves our mouth. Is this our mouth? It is dry as a bone. We've been switched. And we receive no more feet, no clothes no ash no waste no death no life. Instead we are brought cars, and fiendish noise, and a brand new stench stretching out along our path. We sit tight, soaking it up, silently directing traffic, making room. Filled to the brim we vibrate, watching the cracks form.

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You just might see them if you see the shell at my headspring. My old old friends the marsh snails, returned to rearrange my parts. Gentle as mist they go about their business, not minding the swaying minnows. Tiny teeth on tiny tongues shifting specks of algae. Laying their tiny eggs. Tickling as they go.

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