

Joseph Han  
Grey Hair Song



*for Hyun Ja Han*

The pansori singer's prelude  
flows a clear stream

into a high pitched mountain—  
forced to blossom from

her voice—

~

*Shall I kill myself to become a swallow  
and build a nest near my lover's home?  
How shall I live in the trees and weep  
alone? Even the leaves will abandon me*

~

Listen to the drum, the cowhide's pulse.  
It paves the road for her song  
as the earth turns, four ways  
of rhythm and tone:

push  
add  
cut  
undo

~

When her song weeps with grief,  
the drumbeat weakens with old age.

~

When silence lingers from the tip  
of an exhale, the drum must sever.

~

*Let's live this world with ease.  
A man does not live for hundreds  
of years. My dear love is gone  
in a flock of wild geese.  
They carry him to the clouds.*

~

she sings  
for a dead husband  
from intestines filled with sorrow  
and draped by kudzu vines.

Her voice follows changing  
seasons, from fragrant  
grasses to snow.

~

When breathing must slow  
down and voice must lag,  
the drum adds the chorus:

~

The snow covering mountains

dyes hair in cold wind.

~

Her voice wields a bamboo cane,  
wears straw shoes for travel:

*A reed mat will be my  
house. Pine and bamboo trees*

*will be my walls.*

*Let's hang the moon*

*at the end of a drooping  
cinnamon tree*

~

She wishes to shine as the moon.

~

The pansori singer distills  
her husband

from mulberry

leaves and lotus root, a drink

she spills from her mouth  
while weeping.

~

This is her

grey hair song patient for  
a food offering ritual at her

tomb: all worth less than  
the wine  
she drinks alive.

~

When the song is strong and loud,  
the drum strikes the same—  
the spirits feel their hearts.

Joseph Han  
While Her Husband Wandered Southern Seoul



my grandmother stayed home. She met a begging  
woman, a hidden boulder shaping spine into curve—

old age. *If you can sew, I will feed you for every  
thread.* The beggar plucked the clouds and spun

reams of fabric, demanded a husband. *I cannot  
provide what I no longer have.* The beggar's skin

crisped into leaves rotting without water. She brought  
home a demon lover, outpouring demands.

Grandmother traced seams of clothes once  
housing the sanctuary of flesh and love.

She cursed these spirits with every stitch,  
tearing her fabric to blanket them. *These goblins*

*ferment in my home and breathe stench  
on my sons.* Grandmother found a thread

on the floor, spooling from the garment in her  
husband's coat. She held her line as the demons

scoffed against hope in his return, feeling tug  
like earthquakes between her touch.