

SELECTED POEMS
JEONGRYE CHOI



INSTANCES

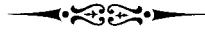


TRANSLATED BY BRENDA HILLMAN,
WAYNE DE FREMERY AND JEONGRYE CHOI

FREE VERSE EDITIONS

Edited by Jon Thompson

INSTANCES



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SELECTED POEMS

Translated by
Brenda Hillman, Wayne de Fremery, Jeongrye Choi

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CONTENTS

PREFATORY NOTE 9

SELECTED POEMS:

16	Motes
18	Watching Deer
20	In Three Minutes
22	Barbed Wire in a Stream
24	A Thief Caught at Dusk
26	Just a Glimmer
28	The Airplane Took Off. The Airplane Disappeared.
32	The Five-thousand-Year-Old Heart I've Swallowed
34	And Blinks
38	A Town with a Trumpet Creeper
40	Window Washer
42	The Absent Tree
44	Snow
46	<i>Hotel California</i> , A Puddle
48	Deer Climbing a Bamboo Pole

50	Spring Rain Shower
52	Forest
54	Mirror, Mirror and Mirror in the Mirror
56	Window
58	A Thicket of Wild Roses
60	Angel
62	On the Way to Buy Meat
64	Canna and the Sword
66	Room
68	A Forest of Donkey Ears
72	With a Mountainside Cherry Tree and the Shadow of a Woman
74	A Dance With the Wall
76	Her Lips are Warm While Yours are Cold
80	Arabesque
82	<i>The Whale</i> Sashimi Restaurant
84	The Evening's Supermarket
86	Red Tubs
88	Watermelon Patch and the Moon
90	An Apple Seller Scattered in Front of a <i>Musso</i>
92	Old Woman
94	While Slipping on Stockings

96	Blood
98	Lebanese Emotion
102	Crimson Field
104	In Front of My Old House
106	Red Marble
108	Intent on Forgetting the Body
110	A Meal at the Aquarium Restaurant
114	A Swamp and a Poem
116	Tigers in the Sunlight
120	I Talked with Geese in Iowa
122	Smell
124	Pyöngjöm
126	Crabs With One Leg Inside Their Holes
128	When I Was Trembling Like a Leaf
132	Frog! Grasshopper! Dung Beetle!
134	An Arrow Lying On the Road

PREFATORY NOTE

It is a great pleasure to help bring Jeongrye Choi's work into an English edition. This is not the first time her writing has appeared in English, but it is the first full-length collection of her work to appear in the United States. I met the author at the University of Iowa in 2006, when she was doing a three-month residency at the International Writers' Workshop. A shy and intense person, Jeongrye was working with a couple of gifted and willing graduate students in the Writers' Workshop—Melissa Dickey and Jordan Stempleman—as well as Ryu Heewon, an exchange student from Korea studying in Iowa, and Choi Jongyoll, now an instructor of English literature in Korea. I am grateful to these writers for the work they did in rendering these versions while the author was in residence at the International Workshop, and of course to Chris Merrill for the program there.

In the middle of the semester, Jeongrye asked me if I'd be willing to help do some poems as well; I was not able to help her much when I was in Iowa, but soon learned that she would be doing a year-long residency the following year at U.C. Berkeley. We were both in touch with our friend Wayne de Fremery, an American PhD candidate in Korean Studies at Harvard, who currently lives in Seoul. Wayne knew Jeongrye's work and its place in contemporary Korean writing; since Jeongrye was just in the process of learning English and I have no Korean, Wayne agreed to provide translations.

Thus the current project began; Wayne produced the first adept versions over the next few years, and I tried to render them into English poetry. He and I

spoke frequently on the phone long-distance, and Jeongrye and I met often during the year of her residency to piece together the work. We frequently sat over tea in Berkeley cafes or in my home, discussing nuances of language and of her many images in the original. Jeongrye was taking classes in English during the year. I wish I had years in my lifetime to learn the beautiful Korean language—I was completely dependent on Wayne and on Jeongrye herself.

My husband Robert Hass, who has a good knowledge of Korean poetry, describes Choi's literary background:

Born in 1955 in Hwasŏng, Kyŏnggi Province, in the Republic of Korea, Choi belongs to the explosive generation of poets who came of age after the thirty-five-year Japanese occupation of her country, after the Korean War, and during the long struggle to rebuild South Korea's shattered economy and to transform its military dictatorships into a democratic government. These poets, not raised on Chinese classicism or Japanese poetry, were charged with the task of making a vital, modern Korean poetry. Educated in Korean poetry at Korea University, Choi has been in the middle of that generation, and, finding her way among its strands of feminist, populist, politically committed, aesthetic-minded, traditionalist, and avant-garde poetries, she has insisted on a poetry of radical freedom which she understood to be the freedom of her own mind.

There is a quality of imagination in her work that is still a rare thing in poetry—despite the opening up of form, content, and linguistic exploration that current innovative poetry has given us in the last few decades. Choi uses the image less for description than as enactment—almost as if the residue of the phantom in the poet's brain were an action in itself—of reality. And the remark is often made—among those who have attempted translation—that what translates best in poetry is the visual image or the philosophical statement. In fact, a poetic image hovers between the irrational and literal, and the great sweep of the imaginative visual realm brings in all other parts of our experience; what Pound calls *phanopoeia* is not simply referencing the way metaphor carries meaning but the way the eye carries both the dream and the other functions of life, as dream-time and work-time are able to coexist in each moment. And though the best

poetry brings engagement through phanopoeia, logopoeia, and melopoeia, it is often most challenging to convey syntax, rhythm, and word-sense from original languages—and thus we are lucky if the poetry is intensely visual so that the translator (or renderer, in my case) may rely on those translatable elements.

Choi's images are what might be termed "surreal," but they are also "magical realism," and at times quite abstract. At times her poetry reminds me of Barbara Guest's writing. Her style of image-making has odd wit and sweep; she makes the memory a layered reality that speaks to the current poetic moment. Her reality is a braid of metaphor, memory, intellect, and feeling. The project of trying to get Choi's work into English has been a realization about this power of the image that continues to be one of the main reasons people read poetry. Images can be quite radical—and the dazzle of Jeongrye's work can remind American readers about the mental variety and hopes for art brought from Modernism. Wayne has indicated she uses a lot of verbal play, syntactic doubling, and punning. The particular oddness of the way she sees the world is very appealing, however intense and tragic the subject matter can sometimes be. Her work is feminist in a way that I find instructive.

It has been a deep pleasure to work with Wayne de Fremery. A delightful, brilliant person with a wry sense of humor, Wayne has a vivid and dynamic relationship to both languages and has done much of the work, talking to Choi about getting the work straight into English lines and then putting them into stanzaic form; Jeongrye's English has improved over these few years, but we have been completely dependent on Wayne to get his first versions of the poems before the final versions could be made. Wayne and I are extremely grateful to LTI Korea for their financial support of the project, as well as for their many helpful suggestions in making the versions final; to poet Gillian Hamel, who advised us and helped to produce the manuscript; to Byungwook Ryu, designer, and to Jon Thompson at Free Verse Editions and Dave Blakesley at Parlor Press for their continuing belief in this work.

Everyone involved in this project is a bit of a perfectionist, and doubtless the poems might have appeared sooner, and in other words, had we not been convinced that we could do better and tried one more time. If, as Auden

remarked, “poems are not finished, they are abandoned,” this is doubly true of translating poems... One feels the gap, the yearning, between the first language and the alternative language, with the strokes of the signs reaching to each other—in the case of this bilingual edition, literally across the gutter of the page. Meaning is restless and cannot be trapped; it goes back and forth. I hope readers of English will find something to cherish in this work as much as I do.

Brenda Hillman

