

# Tale of a Mad Painter

By Kim Dong-in

Translated by Stephen Epstein and Kim Mi Young

Originally published in Korean as *Gwanghwasa* in Yadam, 1935

Translation © 2013 by Stephen Epstein and Kim Mi Young

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and Literature Translation Institute of Korea.

The original manuscripts to these translations were provided by Gongumadang of Korea Copyright Commission.

**The National Library of Korea Cataloging-in-Publication Data**  
Kim, Dong-in

Tale of a mad painter [electronic resource] = 광화사 / [written by]  
Kim Dong-in ; translated by Stephen Epstein, Kim Mi Young.  
-- Seoul : Literature Translation Institute of Korea, 2013  
p.

ISBN 978-89-93360-23-3 05810 : No price

813.61-KDC5  
895.733-DDC21

CIP2013027858

## About Kim Dong-in

Kim Dong-in (1900-1951), together with Yi Gwang-su, is one of early modern Korean literature's representative writers of "pure" fiction. His debut work "The Sorrow of the Weak," which appeared in the journal *Changjo* (*Creation*) in 1919, is considered the first Korean short story to focus in earnest on character development and psychological analysis. A clear, concise style is the hallmark of Kim's writing. As the first author to adopt the plain past tense "*-ieottda*" style and to establish an objective stance in fiction with a third person point of view, he is regarded as having employed a realistic technique and well-rounded character types, in contrast to Yi Gwang-su, who saw literature as a vehicle for enlightenment and whose characters were more flatly drawn.

At the same time, Kim declared that fiction should create an autonomous world whose value inhered within itself. His belief in "art for art's sake" led him to a unique method of composition which he likened to handling puppets. In Kim's view of literary creation a writer must act like a puppet master, controlling his characters, just as God created human beings. This attitude contributes unbridled free rein to a writer's imagination.

In "Tale of a Mad Painter" (1935), Kim's aestheticist tendencies are on full display. The protagonist Solgeo serves as an embodiment of the frequently expressed remark that "evil too can be a form of beauty." Through him Kim explores an obsessive longing for the beautiful that is akin to madness. Solgeo is both the ugliest creature under the heavens and a painter of genius. His abnormal behavior and desperate final act to complete a work of art can be said to express Kim's aestheticism.

## Tale of a Mad Painter

Inwang-san.

Atop a mountain boulder stood young pines; moss boasted of its sheen beneath. Underneath the boulder, several clusters of orchids bloomed yellow, their leaves dancing in the gentle breeze that grazed off the crags.

Yeo stooped and gave a stir with his walking stick. A meter or two remained to the orchids. A shift of his gaze brought the valley into view.

In front of him was a valley carpeted with pine needles. Boulders, tinged red by iron ore, could be seen in the forest gaps, but it was impossible to make out the ground beneath any tree. Slipping here would likely send you tumbling across the needles to some spot far below in the valley.

Behind Yeo a boulder towered several dozen meters. If you stood atop it, a large valley that reached all the way to Muhak Pass would appear. At his feet stood another rock, twice a man's height. Below lay several more orchids and some young pines; beyond those trees, yet another boulder on top of which were bellflowers. Beneath that boulder spread a steep valley.

At the end of that valley, beyond the pines, a glimpse of Seoul was visible at last, the comings and goings of cars vaguely discernible in the streets, where a world of noise and disorder would be on display.

But here Yeo stood, deep in the mountains, in a spot possessing all that such solitude demanded. Wind. Foliage, flowers, and fauna. A cave and cliffs. A stream and sinuous pines. Everything that a mountain fastness required.

The city had been founded in a valley in the recesses of foothills, but over the course of half a millennium its inhabitants built it up into the capital district of today.

It is impossible to know what Yi Seong-gye, the founder of the Joseon Dynasty, intended when he built his capital in a ravine, but the result was that, from a casual hiker's perspective, Seoul was endowed with unprecedented beauty. In what other city in the world could you stroll into mountain solitude on an after dinner walk without even tying your ankle bands?

Yeo looked out over the 500-year-old city lying serenely beneath its dark grey roofs; alpine plants grew in profusion around him. The babbling of the valley's stream and the uncommon birds that flitted before him made him feel like a true man of the mountains.

Yeo inserted his walking stick between the rocks, found a seat between boulder and pine, and sat askew to brace himself from toppling down the slope. He felt an urge for a cigarette but his feet had brought him here, empty-handed, in the thought that he had merely been taking a stroll.

Blue sky in one direction, a massive spire in another, atop of which a few pine branches could vaguely be made out. The subtle scent of resin tickling his nostrils, the sound of wind stirring the pines.

Ah, such seclusion. How many people had reached the spot where Yeo now sat? Could he be the first human being ever to tread this spot? How many other fools would make the extravagant effort to climb all the way up there? Quite a number of intrepid souls might head deep into the mountains for a taste of adventure, but Yeo imagined that few indeed would clamber up Inwang-san so recklessly.

Behind him a grotto had been carved into the rock. Yeo chose not to enter out of fear that a snake lurked within, but tentative pokes with his walking stick made him think the grotto could accommodate two or three people.

Yeo wondered if such a shelter might have proved useful.

All manner of wickedness had occurred in the capital, city of conspiracies, over the course of the last five hundred years. Wouldn't this grotto, but thirty minutes away, have well served plotters aware of its presence?

Stirrings of imagination.

Yeo, drunk with solitude, drifted into an unpleasant reverie.

Conspiracies of all sorts and their denouement—murders, intrigues, exiles. The ugly aspects of the Yi Dynasty's half-millennium history drew Yeo into disagreeable imaginings.

Yeo ransacked his pockets for a cigarette to escape the daydream only to reconfirm to himself that he couldn't possibly have one.

He swept his gaze again over the scene. In one direction the pines appeared to be tilted almost horizontal.

A sudden sparkle.

He studied the gleam and realized that, visible through the pine trees, a stream was issuing from a spring. He assumed it ran between boulders and that the murmur he heard must have been the wind. The burbling of the spring could hardly be so loud as to travel this far.

A spring!

Why not a story about the spring? Perhaps a spring whose water looked, sounded and tasted exquisite might inspire him to a compelling tale? Surely that would be more attractive than a gloomy vision of conspiracy and murder with a stony shelter as a backdrop.

Yeo withdrew his staff from the rocks. Tapping the rock at his feet, he composed the fragment of a tale.

Behold, a painter.

His name? Annoying to come up with a name; let's just call him Solgeo after the

legendary Shilla brush master.

What era?

How about the days of King Sejong the Great, when the city was at its peak of vibrant beauty?

There, where Bugak-san's sprawling ridges petered out, stood Gyeongbok Palace, holding the spirit of Seoul within. Amidst a mulberry orchard outside of Shinmumun, north gate of the palace, hid an elderly man, agony upon his face.

Solgeo, master of the brush.

Solgeo concealed himself in the bushes of the sweltering mulberry patch. Though the leaves filtered the hot sun of high summer, a dewy steam rose off them and swirled above the ground. The lunch packed in his satchel made plain his plans to remain until evening.

What was Solgeo doing? He merely sat, sweat trickling down his face with its tortured expression.

Commoners were forbidden entrance into the mulberry orchard, exclusively assigned to Her Majesty's silk. All day not so much as the shadow of another appeared.

Occasional wind teased the trees overhead but nary a breeze touched Solgeo's secret shelter. Whenever the wind stirred the sweltering air, Solgeo flinched, peering from beneath the bushes as if in agony of anticipation.

Eventually, the evening sun set behind Muak-san, submerging the city in the glow of twilight.

The painter delayed until darkness descended and stealthily slipped from the bushes.

"A day spent in vain. Perhaps tomorrow?"

He sighed and returned to his hut. Despite dusk, the remaining light revealed that the painter possessed unusually ugly features—a nose like the handle of a clay jug, bulging eyes, rice-scoop ears, a trumpet's lips, a toad's face. His visage evoked every adjective used for ugliness. Worse, his remarkably large head rendered his looks obvious from a distance.

His appearance made him ashamed to stroll about in daylight.

Indeed, Solgeo had yet to circulate amongst others since he had come to know the ways of the world.

At the ripe age of sixteen, his master had arranged a marriage for him with a girl from a good family. But the lass fainted when she laid eyes upon him and fled home as soon as she came to.

He later married once more, but that too turned into tragedy. The bride rashly spent the first night with him, but the following day begged her parents to allow her back, saying she was so terrified she would rather die than live with him.

After this pair of agonizing events, Solgeo took to avoiding women. His eccentricity grew. In time he became a total recluse.

Almost thirty years had passed since he departed his dwelling and set up a hut amidst

the forests of Bugak-san, avoiding others and devoting himself to his art. Night was his necessary choice for the inevitable occasions when he had to travel to market for painting supplies and other sundries. If a daytime excursion was unavoidable, he donned a mourner's hat and hid his face with a scrap of hemp cloth.

Almost forty years had passed since Solgeo had embarked upon the path of the artist, almost thirty since he'd taken up celibate seclusion. His vital energy, not spent with women, remained collected within. This creative force made its way to his finger tips, with which he rendered paintings in papers and silk. His pictures had now piled up by the thousands. At first he felt no weariness in his work.

Each painting drew on his innate ability, his teacher's training, and his accumulated energy. As he completed each piece he felt proud accomplishment.

But with the passage of twenty years came the budding of boredom. In a sense such sentiment was heresy for one pursuing a brushmaster's path.

Might he draw something different?

Flowers. Mountains. Seas. Trees. Brooks. Bridges. Sailing ships. Cattle. Cowherds. Elderly men with canes. The moon, if nothing else.

What else had he drawn until now?

The taste of isolation. He wanted to portray the unique, the untraditional. An expressive sketch that went beyond the bearded old men with grizzled hair and the pipe-playing herders that his master had taught him. He wanted to render expressive faces.

And so, Solgeo had spent a decade in portrait painting, having cast aside convention without a second thought.

But after retreating far from the world, the artist's recall of faces had dimmed.

The cunning mien of a merchant, the vacant visage of a passerby, the dull demeanor of a woodcutter; these were the expressions he'd seen and was able to portray even now. Weren't there other faces to capture?

Unique expressions!

Unique expressions!

A dim memory stirred within him as this desire developed.

His mother's face.

Although the memory had almost vanished, in his head flitted images of his mother. He pictured her cuddling him as an infant, gazing down with tearful eyes.

His mother had been extraordinarily beautiful. She possessed a beauty so rare it was as if she had drained away all appeal destined for her descendents.

The painter was a child of the beauty, born after his father had passed away.

The expression of his mother, gazing down upon the fatherless child in her arms, tears in her eyes.

From time to time he pined for that beautiful, benevolent face from forty years ago so much that it caused him to quiver. Since he had matured, all he had found in the faces of

those he encountered was fearful astonishment.

What he wished to draw was her big eyes, brimming with tears, yet brilliant with yearning and affection, a smile spreading at the corner of her lips. The phantom image flashed, lightning-like, deep within his thoughts.

His eccentric mind possessed a passion to draw the world equal to the warping he had experienced in avoiding society and living as a recluse, a passion to create rivaling his resentful frustration.

Grasping his brush and brandishing it gloomily, he contemplated how elsewhere, at that very moment, men and women engaged in embrace.

He grew anxious about his portrait of a beauty. With each passing day he became increasingly idiosyncratic.

His initial desire had merely been to portray a beautiful woman with a lovely expression.

But he had never seen a beauty nearby. As he concentrated his rage in the bristles of a brush that could not lead him to satisfaction, his ideas about the image experienced a gradual evolution.

He wanted to portray a beauty as his wife.

The world had denied him a spouse. Bitterness burgeoned within him over the half century he had spent in solitude, denied the pleasure, known even to insects and birds, of a mate.

Rather than remorse, he felt hatred for the hard-hearted world that had not allowed him a spouse, hatred that no woman wanted him, that he had to live alone, that his demise in the mountain depths would go unnoticed.

‘I will despise the world by drawing with my own brush the wife it refuses me!’

‘I will heap scorn on women born hideous but who believe themselves beauties, by portraying on parchment a woman fairer than the fairest woman who has ever lived.’

‘I will mock those men who believe that their plain-faced partner is a peerless beauty.’

‘I will scoff at those graybeards who glory in their multiple mistresses.’

A beauty! A beauty!

But no matter how deeply he pondered, he could not conjure a beauty; he concentrated with eyes closed, eyes open, head in his hands.

Smooth complexion and fair features constitute average attractiveness. Rouged cheeks and smiling eyes make an otherwise ordinary face more comely. He could imagine such features, and draw them with his brush.

But the flashes of his mother’s face from his infancy meant that such pedestrian beauty could not satisfy him.

One year after another passed for Solgeo amidst suffering and resentment, with naught to show.

Several years had passed since he had completed the lower portion of his portrait

beauty. He was at a loss over the face to set atop it.

When the artist entered his abode, the figure on the wall chided him as if telling him to hurry up and finish. The painting left him ill at ease.

Swathing his face, he took to wandering the city by day, something he'd never done before without special reason.

He hoped for the odd stroke of happenstance that would let him encounter a beauty in the street. If for even a moment he could glimpse one that appealed, he could capture the image and recreate it from memory.

Nonetheless, no high-born maiden showed herself during daytime in the streets of this city, where men and women observed strict separation. The only women visible were servants and lower-class girls.

Sometimes even among such females a beauty appeared, but because their expressions were vulgar and base, none had the look he longed to capture.

He wrapped his face and wandered near wells and markets, where women would gather, pursuing pretty girls to ponder their faces. But he had yet to encounter a beauty who took his fancy.

“Might there be a beautiful lass in the women’s quarters?” The women’s quarters! The women’s quarters! He wished he could line up all the girls there to study their faces....

Days of irritation came and went as he continued his hunt. As a last effort he concocted a plan to sneak into the queen’s orchard and pilfer the face of a court maid as she picked mulberry leaves. Alas, that adventure as well went for naught. No court girl came that day.

However, this was peak picking season. If Solgeo waited patiently, court maids might come. Obsessed with the desire to draw his beauty—his picture wife—the painter hid in the orchard again the following day, his venom rising. He had no choice but to conceal himself and wait.

One month had passed. Every day the painter packed his lunch and went to the orchard. But every evening he returned to his hut, sighing heavily.

It wasn’t that he had not seen court maids. They took turns appearing, almost as if revealing themselves on purpose to the concealed painter. They arrived in groups, picked leaves, and left again, their sleeves and skirts aflutter. In the course of the month he’d seen several dozen maidservants.

All were beautiful. They undeniably had faces more elegant than those he scorned at the well.

However, the painter was intent on their eyes.

In their eyes he sought comfort and concern. In their eyes he looked for overflowing love. But their eyes lacked such emotion. In other words, they were ordinary beauties of the world.

Such common loveliness did not satisfy Solgeo. His ambition was to possess a woman of unsurpassed beauty as revenge upon the world for denying him female companionship.

Long sighs left his mouth when he returned home to his hut. A month passed, and his sojourns to the orchard ceased.

A fine fall day, the sky blue.

The painter, replete with his resentment and yearning, a bamboo basket at his side, plodded toward the stream to wash his dinner rice.

Suddenly he stopped.

Astride a rock by the stream sat a girl amidst the dense pine. Dappled light filtering through the pine branches played upon her face as she gazed at the flowing water.

“What? A maiden?”

Solgeo dwelled in a spot remote from houses, higher than any village, touched by no trail. On occasion over the last thirty years a woodcutter or shepherd had arrived but no others. And now here a girl had presented herself.

“Who could she be?”

The painter stood up, stupefied, and gazed at her. In his heart he felt heavy tension. One step, two. Solgeo attempted to approach her in silence. The girl’s face became clearer as the distance decreased.

On the painter’s face a blush bloomed.

The girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, had an attractiveness that was rare, but rather than her features, it was her overall expression that stunned him.

The girl focused her full attention on the flowing stream. Her big eyes gazed upon it with the rapture of one who has forgotten how to blink.

Did the palace of the Dragon King lie in the stream? What could she have been staring at, her hair tousled by the breezes off the pines?

What was she gazing at so intently, a smile in her eyes and on her lips, a sublime smile that merged dreams, desire, and delight?

Aah.

The painter had finally found what he sought. Over the last ten years he had tried in vain to find a beauty on ordinary streets, at well sites, and in the queen’s orchard. And now, unexpectedly, he had found the beautiful face he so sought right before him.

The painter made his way quickly toward the girl, fully forgetting his ugliness and the shock that she would suffer when she saw him.

The girl gave a start at Solgeo’s steps. She looked up toward him, gazing as if into the distance with her eerie eyes.

“Ah!”

Solgeo hesitated over what to say, but the girl spoke first.

“Where am I?”

Where was she?

“In the hills of Mt. Inwang, in a spot that has no name. How did you get here, miss?”

“I....”

Her face suddenly took on a look of loneliness.

“I was feeling my way up along the stream.”

The painter tilted his head. He made a movement. The girl’s eyes were open, motionless, continuing to gaze into the distance. Solgeo had no notion what she was staring at. Eventually he cried out.

“Can you see?”

“I am blind, sir.”

Blind. Her answer came in a voice near tears. The painter drew closer.

“Blind? Then what brought you here?”

The girl hung her head as if in response, but Solgeo did not understand. The loss of her astonishingly attractive expression dispelled his curiosity.

Surely she was a rare beauty. What had amazed the painter, however, was not her beauty, but the breathtaking charm on her face.

“Ah, poor lass! Evening is coming. You need to descend before dark.”

The painter decided to give her up at this point. The girl responded to his words.

“I find no fault with the darkness. But is it true that twilight is very beautiful?”

“Of course! It is beautiful.”

“Can you describe it?”

“Golden light glows in rays from the western hills, dyeing the whole world red. Green pines, indigo rocks, russet stumps are all bathed in rays of gold.”

“What is gold like? And what about scarlet, red, and indigo? I understand that the world is bright, but what’s the difference between bright light and red light? I groped my way up here, but it is impossible for me to understand this beauty from the sounds in my ears, the rustling of the wind, and the stream splashing on the rocks.”

Her mysterious expression slowly came back. Waves of longing were reflected in her large, limpid eyes, and her beauty returned.

Solgeo took a seat opposite the girl.

“If you follow all the way downstream, you will reach the ocean. There lies the palace of the Dragon King. The palace pillars are wrapped with rainbow silks, the terrace stones engraved with jade, the wind chimes forged of gold, and the door posts inset with pearl.”

With each detail of Solgeo’s story, rapture grew in the eyes of the girl. In the end he contrived a way to lead her to his hut.

“If your family does not mind, I will tell you more about the palace of the Dragon King.”

As Solgeo thus seduced her, the girl lifted her eyes toward the distant sky. Her parents, she said, would not care about the disappearance of their disabled daughter. She followed him without hesitation.

Yeo put an abrupt halt to his surging daydream.

“How can I develop this tale?”

A line from a popular tune caught his ears, distracting him.

He lifted his head. Others seemed to have arrived below in the valley. The bustle must have reached him subconsciously.

Annoying lyrics! Damn it!

Their interference made it difficult to continue composing.

But what is a story without an ending? I need to conclude the story, Yeo thought. Should I finish by saying that the painter brought the girl to his hut and fulfilled his decade-long desire, drawing her face as he told her about the palace of the Dragon King?

But what would be the point of such an insipid ending? It could work, but his elaborate introduction for such a banal conclusion would be meaningless.

What about a different ending?

“The painter returned to his hut with the girl, and told of the palace of the Dragon King. But her face soon lost its lovely look, as this was no longer the first time she had heard the tale and he did not inspire her interest. The painter’s plan went for naught and he left his portrait eternally unfinished.”

This ending, too, was unsatisfactory.

Try something else.

“The painter brought the girl home. The more he looked at her, the more attractive she became. He threw away his portrait and married her. The blind girl spent a blissful life, uncomplaining, despite her husband’s ugliness. Solgeo, who had set his heart upon a portrait wife, now possessed a bride of unsurpassed beauty.”

Surely would not do.

Annoying, irritating, damn song!

Yeo stood up. He was loath to sit further in this spot where inspiration had deserted him. He could still hear the song. “I’d better move out of earshot.”

As he looked down, a glint through the pines suggested the spring he had observed earlier.

“The spring. Yes. Why don’t I go down to the spring, the source of the tale?”

Descending the rock face was more difficult than climbing up had been. When you climb a bluff and make a mistake, you just fall back to where you start from. But if you make a misstep in going down, who knew where you might end up? You could roll all the way down to the entrance of Cheongwudong. Moreover, that walking stick, helpful on the climb up, can become a real nuisance.

It took several minutes for Yeo to reach the spring.

Indeed there was a rock big enough for a person to sit on. Would this be the rock that the painter had used to wash rice? Or maybe the rock that the girl had daydreamed upon? Yeo had thought that he would find a limpid pool below, but it was less than a handspan deep and the water trickled weakly over the rock.

At least the valley was very quiet. Even the sound of the wind was distant. Surrounded by pine trees and rocks, this melancholy valley gave off the feeling that a hermit artist might have taken pleasure in long ago as he shunned the world.

“Well then, shall I conclude the story in this valley?”

The painter led the girl back to his hut.

He was so excited that he didn't even want to cook dinner. As he entered, even the body of the woman who had waited in the scroll so many years seemed to welcome him cheerfully.

“Have a seat over there.”

The headless portrait that had so long rebuked the painter unfolded before him. Pigments lay at the ready.

Solgeo seated himself before the scroll, his heart bursting, and sat the girl facing south so that light shone on her face. Bringing brush to paint, he continued the story.

The twilight was about to finish its daily destiny. The painter's energies, stored for a decade merely as desire, were all poised in his hand.

“So, can you picture it?”

As his eyes ranged over the girl's face, his lips told of the palace of the Dragon King, his hand working the brush with lightning strokes.

“In the palace of the Dragon King is a magic pearl known as cintamani, a treasure that makes one's dreams come true. If you roll it over your eyes, you will be able to see the shining sun and the moon too.”

“What? Is there really such a ball?”

“Of course! If you heed me, I will take you to the palace of the Dragon King in a few days, borrow the ball and heal your eyes.”

“Will I be able to see the sun and the moon?”

“Absolutely! The sun and the moon, the brilliant seven-colored wonder that is the rainbow, beautiful forest, secluded valleys....There's nothing you won't be able to see.”

“Oh, how wonderful if you could get the cintamini for me.”

Aah. A stunningly beautiful expression. The painter transferred it to canvas intact.

Twilight swiftly turned into night. At this point all was complete but the pupils of the eyes.

He wanted to finish, but it had become too dark to draw them. To continue might affect the spirit of the portrait.

“It won’t hurt to leave the pupils for one more day,” thought Solgeo. And in any case, having accomplished the dream he had cherished for a decade, the painter felt ineffable excitement.

“Ah...Ah!” He exclaimed with the happiness of one who finally fulfils a long deferred desire.

But with this relief a different kind of tension and passion arose inside Solgeo.

To study the girl’s face in the fading light Solgeo had to sit so close that their knees touched. Relief over the painting, the intense fragrance of the girl that ran to his nose, and a proximity to her that took hold of his entire body left him almost paralyzed. With each passing moment he trembled more. In the dark, her large, blissfully gleaming eyes and her lips quivering with passion stirred confusion in his soul.

When morning came, Solgeo and the maiden were no longer strangers to each other.

“I will definitely complete the pupils.”

The painter, casting aside his solo life and sharing with the blind girl the breakfast that he had consumed alone for the last thirty years, sat in front of the painting.

“What about the palace of the Dragon King?”

The maiden’s eyes twinkled with happiness.

However, her eyes, reflected in the painter’s own eye for beauty, were not those of yesterday. They remained incomparably beautiful, but they were now the eyes of a woman seeking a man’s love. She had cast aside her prior existence as a maligned cripple and tasted the spring of life the previous night for the first time. Her eyes now expressed the passions of a wife.

“What about the palace?” He urged again.

“Please hurry there to get the cintamani and heal my eyes. I want to see the heavens and the earth. And I can’t wait to see you.”

She put total trust in what Solgeo had told her in bed, boasting that he was a handsome man in the prime of his twenties.

“Of course, I’ll get it. It shines like a rainbow!”

“I can’t wait to see the colors of the rainbow either.”

“Right, right! So try to imagine it! Think hard!”

“Yes, I want to see that as soon as possible.”

He looked down. The painting at his knees awaited completion.

Although what remained in the blind girl’s eyes was beautiful, it could not transcend her look of passion. These were not the eyes he had longed to capture for the last ten years.

“Right! Imagine the palace of the Dragon King!”

“What’s the point of imagining it? I need to see it!”

“Try!”

“I cannot even guess. How can I imagine it?”

“Imagine it like you did yesterday!”

“I’ll try...”

The painter lost his temper.

“Come on! The palace! The palace of the Dragon King!”

“Okay...”

“Think about the palace of the Dragon King! What does it look like?”

“A rainbow shines brightly there.”

“What else?”

“There are golden pillars, no, the pillars are wrapped in silk. And there are emerald pearls!”

“Not emerald pearls! Emerald jade.”

“And there are jade angle rafters or maybe a gate of jade?”

“Damn it! You fool!”

Solgeo grabbed the girl tightly by the shoulders with his enormous hands and shook her.

“Think again carefully. The palace of the Dragon King is...?”

“It’s in the sea and...”

Fear drained the vitality from the girl’s face. Solgeo couldn’t restrain himself from slapping her.

“Fool!”

Such an idiot! As he gazed at her, the blind girl stared into space, unblinking. His anger grew as he regarded her dull eyes. He grabbed her by the collar.

“You moron! Imbecile! Blind bitch!”

He shook her, hurling every curse he could think of. He shook her shoulders even harder at seeing a hint of hatred in her blank eyes, open in the way the blind’s eyes should be.

Before long she became too heavy for him to hold and he released her.

She tumbled backward, her hands flying into the air. Her fall upset the ink stone. Drops of ink splattered across her face.

In shock, Solgeo shook the girl, but she had already left the world of the living.

Flustered and thoroughly beside himself, he moved his eyes to the painting unthinkingly and collapsed with a cry.

The pupils in the painting had been completed. Eventually recomposing himself, he sat up slightly and saw the painting only to realize the pupils had been rendered in both eyes.

Their expression made the painter fall to the floor with a thud. The look within them clearly reflected the bitterness that had appeared when he grabbed her by the collar.

It was not so odd that the girl’s fall had caused the ink stone to overturn. It was also not so odd that ink had splash as a result. But how could it spatter so bizarrely? The pupils portrayed by the landing of the ink, the irises formed by the way it ran—how could they all have come together so strangely?

The painter sat vacantly, unable to calm his shaking, a corpse on one side and a portrait of the dead on the other.

A few days later an elderly madman with a gloomy face appeared wandering in Seoul. He clutched a weird portrait of a woman.

No one knew where he had come from or what his tale was. He took special care of the portrait and when people asked to see it he would flee, making desperate efforts not to show it.

Thus he wandered for several years until one day, amidst a blizzard, he lay his head on a stone pillow and reached the end of his life. Even on his death bed, he clutched the scroll of the portrait to his bosom.

“Old painter! I offer you my sympathy for your lonesome life!”

Yeo stirred the water a couple of times with his staff and stood quietly.

As he looked up, the summer twilight was dancing over Bugak-san, and mountain birds were crossing the eternal valley to the north and south.