

***Ritual Utensils***

You draw water.  
Yesterday as you did today, today as you will tomorrow.  
The headwaters emerge from a range of calm mountains,  
fish course through its pools.  
As though deflecting the flow with your palm,  
you draw water  
as though your palm is deflected by the flow.  
In the north, water runs thin.  
So the vase you hold loses its shadow in sunlight.  
Every dream is a nightmare.  
Through this small town, 95 streams surge,  
and 309 bridges cross those streams.  
People come and go over them silently.  
You're someone who knows  
the secrets of the shallows and the conspiracies of the pools.  
Sometimes, a bland smile comes to your lips  
which can be read as the sign that you've broken free from your ordinary life.

You can see it.  
And though it appears as one stream, many smaller streams compose it.  
One stream carries mud,  
another carries nothing.  
Even while your body heat is lifted away from your wet ankles by cold wind  
blowing above the river,  
you continue to draw the clear water  
which flows with no other ambition.  
Your vase goes transparent as a ritual utensil,  
and your body shows no sheen of sweat.  
Suddenly the smile drains from your bland, pale face because  
when your fingers make contact with the indifferent water,  
you're nearly carried away to the world beyond.  
What you despise:  
trees, duck down, anything that radiates heat,  
and language.  
What you love:  
picked flowers, cut flowers, whatever fades, slenderness  
especially, forms that cast no thick shadows.  
Only cut flowers, which you arrange.  
Every day, you change the vase's water,  
and wait for the moon to rise.  
You talk very little,  
except on that occasion when you came across the foreigner  
crossing the old bridge.

No letters reach your house.  
The slow suicide of another cigarette.  
The well of your vase, so high above its base,  
resembles a Korean ritual vessel.  
Children are born, children grow,

seeds take root, budding out into forests,  
and then, die.  
The seven stars up in the northern sky tilt.

But still, I'm curious why  
you draw water,  
arrange flowers, douse yourself.  
Water allows cut flowers to live a few more days,  
they say,  
but you argue that water drowns flowers.  
Your flowers, I remember, were diaphanous as an antlion's wings,  
even in sunlight they cast no shadow.

On the northern waters whose murmurs can't be heard,  
yesterday's shadows fall, today's shadows flow off,  
you wipe the bland smile from your lips.  
Up there is Yugaose Bridge,  
upon which, night after night, they say, a woman stands apart from her shadow.

"Look—that man.  
That's Mr. Serunbato. The one  
who arrived from the desert just before the war broke out,  
so now he can't go home.  
He wasn't much acquainted with 'water,'  
but now he bathes every day,  
he washes his body  
and watches the river go by."  
That's your longest monologue, meant for no one.  
The transparent water barely holds anyone's shadow to its surface.

Elusive water.  
You draw it up,  
pour it over yourself.  
Today courses by like yesterday,  
today floats like a cork on tomorrow.  
And that's why you draw water.  
As though scoring the silence, 95 streams flow,  
in the pool something breathless lives,  
panting, there in the shallows of the river, where you stand,  
your body like the thin wings of an antlion,  
casting no shadow under the sun.  
Your vase, going more transparent still,  
is filled with dead, mute water.  
Your flowers, day by day, go transparent,  
water rots them, it was you who said so.  
You draw water,  
your body rinsed of human scent,  
the bodies of creatures in the pool growing colder,  
the flowers going transparent, not wilting,  
you go transparent.  
And the vase, too, goes transparent.