

Ian Haight

These poems are translated from their original *hansi*, which is the Korean use of classical Chinese to write poetry. Hō lived in 16th century Korea. She is considered by many Korean scholars to be Korea's greatest female poet.

Lament of the Castle Builders

I

Men in thousands pound the ground with rammers—
from under earth resounds the *thoom thoom* sound.
Struggling with the necessity of good work,
on the borders, there is no generous governor.

II

We build a bulwark for the town, then build a rampart—
a high embankment slows the barbarians' attacks.
Fear only when they come in large numbers—
the walls will not stop them.

Going to the Frontier

I

A beacon lights the Yellow River—
soldiers depart the capital.
They lean on spears, sleep in snow—
their horses charge to Mongol sands.

From the north, wind blows, jingles gilt trim clappers—
scolding winds from the border howl through castle horns.
Year after year, the horses chained, overlong—
all the pain, drawn out for war.

II

Last night, signal arrows flew—
a fortress, said to be surrounded.
Through a blizzard, borderland horns sounded—
the sharpest swords ran to Geum Mi Mountain.

Along the frontier, soldiers age quickly—
the horses, weak from long travels.
Men place value on chivalry—
return with heads from Hwaran.

Lament for Children

Last year, I lost my treasured daughter;
this year I've lost my beloved son.
Piercing tears throughout our family's land—
they lay side by side in their graves.

The emptiness of wind through white poplars—
candles of wispy lights glimmer among pines.
I scatter paper money
calling your souls with pure water
poured over your graves.

You will know each other's spirits—
every night, play together as you once did.
Though a child now grows in my womb
how long will it live?

Blank, I sing my tears,
bitterly breathing air.

Small Lingering Joys: II

During daylight, no one's in the decrepit house,
though an owl, bold, hoots from a cluster of mulberry.
Iced moss covers a well-hewn footstep—
sparrows nest in the barren pavilion.

Wagons and horses often came to the stable—
today the house is a den for animals.
I understand now wise men's words—
I refuse to pursue honor or wealth.

The Young Singer, Maksu

I

“Near Suk-sung’s stone walls I was born.
Raised inside the walls at the front of the town,
I played around the walls for pleasure.
I married a man from my walled town.”

II

“I live in White Jade House—
my husband rides a quick horse.
At sunrise, in front of the stone town’s gate,
we ply a two-sailed boat on the spring river.”