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The Dreaming Beast

by Lee Chang-dong

Translated by Heinz Insu Fenkl

The mule is gone, thought Taegi. I'll never see him again. His fingers shook as he unbuttoned his pants, and he leaked a few drops before he was quite ready. Facing the tall smokestack of the Slurpy Bar factory across the open sewer, he spewed his piss, his body trembling all the while.

Twilight stretched itself across the sky above the factory. Taegi closed his eyes. That scarlet light—the same glossy sheen of the mule's back when it was brushed, scrubbed, and combed—would vanish without a trace if he opened his eyes to look.

Slowly the scarlet changed into a deep purple, the color of the dried and clotted blood trailing from the mule's dead body. The city was swallowing everything up into its dark abyss once again—the smoke shooting out of the factory smokestack was spreading like ink in water, blotting out the sunset.

Taegi didn't even think of buttoning his pants. He stared vacantly up at the smokestack that rose high into the sky. It stood tall and firm whenever he happened to see it. Taegi looked down at his penis, as if to compare, but it must have been insecure from the start, buried there in his pubic hair, so small and stubby it was nearly invisible. It just lay there inert, shriveled like the remnants of a plucked pepper.

But the smokestack—if not for the building that stretched out beneath it—would have been hard to imagine as a mere factory chimney. It loomed too high, like a giant tower, a monument, or the pillar of the world holding up the sky.

Taegi spat, still holding his wilted penis in his hand. He straightened and tucked it back into his pants, lifted up his bag, and looked back for a moment at the levy road he had walked along. He could hear the whirring of the factory and see the mule-colored twilight descending. Along the open sewer a low, flat housing project lay wrapped in a silent funk.

The open sewer was thick with the factory's wastewater. It got the runoff from the dye factory at Sangryo and sometimes it flowed a brilliant yellow, or as red as a virgin's period. The water was black and murky now. Last summer a six-year-old kid had drowned in it. The people in the projects spent all night searching, but the child was never found.

The projects—that was what they called the houses that stretched along the bank of the sewer. After a major manufacturing plant moved in on the other side of town, the civic authorities had relocated the people who lived there and put them here in houses made of cement brick. Low and flat, following the sewer—at first glance they looked like a species of long beetle, and if you looked closer, they looked like dead, crumbling shells; and the people—every possible species of them—lived in the projects in hordes, like ants marching in and out to consume the beetles' dessicated remains, and Taegi, a part-timer in the city sanitation department, was one of them.

Across the open sewer, an enormous industrial site was being constructed. Each day, garbage trucks would speed down the roadway along the sewer bank, relay after relay, dumping their loads in the vacant lot not yet occupied by the factory. The garbage covered the fields and paddies with shocking speed. The city was like an obese animal that shed its fur each day, or an old man with intestinal problems puking up everything he had eaten. Taegi

worked for the city, loading and hauling that garbage. Twice a day, he led the mule from one side of the city to the other, sweeping and collecting. From where he happened to be—at the garbage dump, or in one of the many partitioned units in the projects—Taegi watched the tall buildings raise their shining heads high above the pale dust at dawn. He saw the fantastic explosions of dust at midday, and at night he heard the breathtaking throbbing sounds of the factory machines.

Now he was about to take his leave of all those things. He slowly shuffled in the direction of the levy road, which was gradually growing dark.

A drunk staggered toward him down the path, mumbling something unintelligible. As he got closer, Taegi realized it was the words of a song.

Yesterday, when we made love,
We become one for the very first time—

“What’s this?” The man stopped and brought his face up close under Taegi’s chin, stinging his nostrils with the reek of liquor.

“Brother Kim, right? Where are you headed?”

Taegi recognized his laugh. It was very familiar, but much to his regret, he couldn’t immediately place who this person was.

“Come on, it’s me. Me! Don’t you recognize me?” He unfastened a few shirt buttons, half exposing his chest, which was flushed from the liquor. His hair was cut short like a draftee’s.

It was probably the close-cropped hair that made him hard for Taegi to recognize. But now that he tilted his head back, just the slightest bit, and raised a hand toward his hair as if to brush a long strand away from his face—that habitual gesture made Taegi take a closer look at his face.

“Hey, it’s Kidong!”

“Damn! You’re sharp! As you can see, I’ve been drinking.”

As far as Taegi knew, Kidong never drank. Everyone who lived

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in the projects knew what a miser he was, though he went around wearing garish Hawaiian shirts and pants that hugged his ass. He worked at the Slurpy Bar factory, and all he did from the beginning of the work day was flirt with the female employees. Whenever a girl his age happened to walk by, he wasn't happy until he had stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled to his heart's content. Taegi was more than familiar with the sound of Kidong's pop songs carrying across the sewer embankment at night.

Kidong wore his hair long. It was his great pride—glossy and stylishly flipped back. Whenever he had a spare moment, the first thing he did was take out his hand mirror so he could admire his hair.

"So, brother, what's your business out here? It's nearly dark." Kidong swayed back and forth, grinning and laughing as if to prove he was drunk. He had an unusual grin, one side of his lip curled up in a sneer, subtly exposing his teeth, one eye squinted shut. It was something he had designed especially to use on the female workers at the Slurpy Bar factory but—perhaps to keep in practice—he used it on everybody.

"You look like an entirely different person," said Taegi.

"Oh," Kidong replied glumly, his energy suddenly gone. "You mean this hair? These things happen." Once again, he tilted his head back and made the sweeping gesture with his hand, as if his hair were still long.

"Let me buy you a drink," he said, pulling Taegi by the arm. "I'll buy you a drink to celebrate getting my hair cut today."

Taegi did not decline. He walked in whichever direction Kidong was leading him. He hadn't intended to tell anyone in the projects that he was leaving, but now that he'd run into Kidong, he didn't see any particular reason to shake him off.

The street converging with others at the entrance to the bridge was already brightly illuminated—the streetlights had come on. With the windfall of industry, the place was suddenly booming: a theater, a tailor shop, a clothing store, a butcher, a beauty salon, a

café, a real estate office, and even an employment office, all clustered there. Occasionally the headlights of a car flashed quickly by; light flowed out of the stores lining the street; people staggered out of the drinking establishments, arms flapping in the air—and sometimes they were all lit up, rushing toward your eyes, or spinning in circles. The whole street, now that alcohol had begun to flow, was properly intoxicated, humming, feeling good.

“After tonight, I’m leaving on the first train. . . .”

Kidong stumbled again and clutched Taegi’s arm. “So where are you planning to go?”

Perhaps it was because he’d been thinking of leaving, but as he looked at the frenetic energy of the street, it felt to Taegi as if his chest had been hollowed out, as if he’d been the victim of a cold-hearted whore. Even after he was gone, the people who came reeling out of the bars would go back in, the lights in the display windows would still shine, and the street would go on thriving with the energy of a boom town.

“I think I’ll leave on the night train.”

“Where to? Are you going back home? You got news that your old man’s sick?”

“I’m not going back for a visit. It’s permanent.”

Kidong stopped and whistled sharply. A large group of women was walking by on the other side of the street, as if they were just leaving the factory after work. “What will you do with *him*?” Kidong jabbed his hands into his pockets and strutted with some style now, as if his drunkenness had just evaporated. “I mean the one with four legs.”

“He’s dead,” said Taegi.

Kidong stopped. “Are you kidding?”



As he lay dead in the street, the mule’s unfathomably deep eyes were looking upward, as if he were dreaming about something.

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The warm steam of his breath still leaked from his nostrils, and the flow of blood from his cracked skull lay sticky on the asphalt. It was the end of him. The cop from the neighborhood police box asked Taegi his name and address and filled out a simple accident report. “I swear it’s not my fault. That crazy pony suddenly ran out in front of my truck. No one could have avoided him!” The truck driver laid out his explanation, the nape of his neck gleaming with sweat, his veins bulging. All the while, Taegi just stared silently at the mule’s eyes—which looked as if he were still alive, deep in thought about something—and the dark blood covering the surface of the street, beginning to clot. “Hey, why did your pony run out in front of the truck?” asked the cop, turning toward Taegi. “Is this man’s explanation correct?” When Taegi did not answer, the driver shouted, incredulously, “Look at him! He knows his pony was crazy!” After listening to several more accounts from witnesses, the cop finished filling out the accident report. But when he wrote that the casualty was a pony, Taegi finally spoke up. “He’s not a pony.” “What?” The cop lifted his head, narrowing his eyes. “What do you mean it’s not a pony?” “He’s a mule. Not a pony and not a donkey. He may just be a dead animal, but he deserves to be identified properly. Please write that he was a mule.”



“That’s really sad,” Kidong said with an appropriately sympathetic expression. “He was like part of the family in the projects. Why do you suppose he suddenly ran out in front of a truck? He didn’t really go crazy, did he?”

“Hey, let’s leave it alone now, all right?”

“It means your meal ticket is gone, doesn’t it? But then you also get to leave this place. Well, in either case . . .” A food vendor was parked along the street; Kidong pulled Taegi toward the tent wagon. “I can’t just send you off quietly, without even a drink, can I? If you’re not gonna drink on a day like today, then when? Don’t worry

about it. There's a train first thing in the morning, and don't you worry about missing it." Kidong pulled the canvas flap aside and entered first.

"Welcome."

"Give us each a glass of *soju* and a skewer of fish cakes with soup," Kidong said.

They perched on the wooden stools.

"From what I've heard . . ." Kidong took a sip of the soup and turned his head toward Taegi. He put his little finger in his mouth, sucked on it loudly and then wiggled it back and forth under Taegi's eyes. "Is it true that the mule had an underdeveloped prick?"

Taegi grabbed Kidong's little finger with one hand and yanked it down. "He wasn't underdeveloped. He just couldn't reproduce."

"It's the same thing, isn't it? I once saw them castrate a pig when I was out in the country and it was so awful I couldn't bear to watch. But they say that after it's cut off, the pig gets fatter and the meat tastes better. So I guess you never know. You learn, but sometimes you don't understand."

The carbide flame flickered and danced in the wind. Kidong carefully picked up one of the *soju* glasses that was turned upside-down on the counter. He peered inside, and continued, "If you really think about it, we're no different from the mule."

The mule's penis was incredibly large. So large that it seemed not to be just a reproductive organ, but an organ designed especially for him. Taegi remembered how at times it would grow to an unbelievable length, as long as a warrior's sword you saw only in movies, so long its tip touched the ground; and he remembered the mule's eyes at those times, glowing like an oak tree in flames. His organ would grow abruptly, at the most unexpected times.

Taegi never understood the mule's strange sexual arousal or why it would start so suddenly in the middle of the city. In the deep shadows between looming apartment buildings, in the middle of the street with traffic rushing by, he would suddenly stop walking and stand there as if his hooves were stakes driven into the earth. At

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those times Taegi had no choice but to stand there and wait for the mule's huge erection to calm down. For a long time, the mule would stand, frightening and motionless as he restrained his urges, his two eyes burning as if he were dreaming; and then he would slowly resheath that blade he had drawn, his whole body would tremble, and then he would begin walking again.

"I'll tell you a story. Will you listen?" said Kidong. The second glass of *soju* went into his throat. It was cold going down but hot when it reached his stomach. Kidong put down the glass with a loud *clack!* and began.

"This happened at the factory. As you know, we make hot buns in winter and in summertime we make an ice cream pop called a Slurpy Bar or Slorpy Bar, whatever. . . . Well, a strange rumor was going around this past summer. The heat—it wasn't normal. It was enough to kill perfectly healthy people."

Because of the heat wave, everyone ate Slurpy Bars. On the street, in their homes, at bus stops—people were sucking on them everywhere, and women especially liked them. Whenever Kidong saw some coltish girl sticking a Slurpy Bar in her mouth and shamelessly sucking on it, he couldn't help feeling naked. True, the Slurpy Bar was sweet and cool, but Kidong knew it was a cheap frozen product made of artificial ingredients that gave a passably sweet taste, mixed with plain water, and injected into a vinyl bag.

It was beyond belief, the huge number of Slurpy Bars that melted and disappeared into that huge number of mouths. But if you thought about the people of the city sucking away, it was as simple as this: they did it for the sweet taste and the coolness; it lingered momentarily inside the mouth before it was gone.

Whatever the reason, people wanted Slurpy Bars every summer, and sales were good for the factory. It ran 24 hours a day in two 12-hour shifts, and yet there were always complaints that the product was in short supply. Then a strange rumor started to circulate. It was said that each day, some of the Slurpy Bars in the factory disappeared and piles of empty Slurpy Bar wrappers were found in

the women's restroom. The rumor spread like a contagious disease, and soon there was no male factory worker that didn't know about it.

"You know what was going on—according to the rumor?"

Kidong stopped talking and emptied the last drop of *soju* from his glass into his mouth. "What does the Slurpy Bar look like, exactly? Something all the girls desire? Same size, same shape?"

As the *soju* went down his throat, Kidong's whole body trembled. He looked over at Taegi's expression. Just then, the owner of the tent wagon raised his face over the hissing flames of the charcoal briquettes and laughed.

"It's true. They look just like the real thing. They probably made them that way on purpose to sell more."

"That's exactly what I'm saying! So whenever they had the chance, the female workers would hide them one at a time and then go off to the bathroom. In that heat. . . it probably gave them chills all the way up to their tits."

"Sounds like a complete lie to me," Taegi said. He watched the fish burning over the charcoal flame, the smelly smoke occluding the interior of the tent like a pale smokescreen.

"True," Kidong nodded, his face red and hot, "but you can't know for sure if it's a lie. I didn't believe it either, at first. Maybe it's a story somebody made up to keep from falling asleep on the night shift. Your body gets heavy, you get drowsy, your eyes sting like they're full of sand. . . . Well, later, there was this other rumor. If the girls kept sneaking off and doing that, they got sick and ended up sterile. Sterile, you know? They couldn't have kids. Because the Slurpy Bars were so cold it wasn't good for women. Like they say, a rumor ends up biting its own tail. Damn it, you should be able to tell how much is a lie and how much is true." Kidong brooded awhile, watching the undulating shapes as the carbide flames grew longer and shorter.

The owner of the wagon tent replied, "Well, you can't know whether that last part was made up by the factory management. You know, to stop the loss of their product."

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“In any case,” said Kidong, “the story about the female workers getting sterile is a serious mood killer. Give us another round here. No—give us a whole bottle.”

“Don’t overdo it. You’re already drunk,” said Taegi.

“What’s the matter? Like I said, if you don’t drink on a day like today, then when do you drink?” Kidong quickly lifted the bottle of *soju* that was in front of the owner and poured. His enormous shadow trembled where it was projected on the canvas inside the tent.

“Think about how many female workers are in the factory. Lots of those girls are pretty. I even poked a few of them myself. You see their faces going into the factory at the beginning of the morning shift, all gleaming in the sunlight, and it really makes your sap rise. Their work area is separated from the men’s, but I see them coming out at lunch time and sitting on the grass in their green uniforms. I can’t stand not whistling at them. But, Kim, to say they can’t have children—how would that make *you* feel?”

It was a real mood killer. It had been a long time since Taegi had had an erection. The Slurpy Bar factory operated continuously, 24 hours a day in two shifts, day and night. The 6 A.M. siren that signaled the change in shifts was what chased Taegi from sleep each morning. As he awoke, the very first thing Taegi would do was to reach into his shorts, slowly sliding his hands down his belly to where his penis hung, until he felt it with his fingertips. He aspired to see his penis hard and erect, but that hope went unfulfilled, and each time he held in his hand a shriveled member—with no vitality and no pulse. It was soft and pliable like a fish cake limp from being dunked in hot soup.

From the time he had left home to come up to the city, Taegi had not been able to get it up, no matter what. At home, imbued with the fresh power of the ocean at dawn, his penis had stood as stiff as the base of a bush clover, poking his shorts up into a little tent. That was how it used to be. But here, from the time he had started dragging the mule from one corner of the city to the other with

white dust coating the rims of his nostrils, it had just wilted without a pulse. Taegi thought of himself as a cripple. A prick that can't stand has no use, and since his tool was useless, he was the most pitiful of cripples.

"Hey, since we already brought it up, how about one more?" Kidong's face grew redder and redder and his speech was less inhibited. "I also heard this at the factory. The old man who's the president of the company—he's got tons of money, the factory is running smoothly, his kids all got their turn going to America to study and now they're managing director and executive VP. What worries could he have? But like they say, there's no end to human greed. These days he keeps fresh young girls around himself all the time to enhance his vitality. Quality-assured fresh virgins."

"Enhance his vitality by having girls around? He'd probably drain it," the owner pitched in as he put the fishcake skewers in front of them.

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Kidong. "Girls gushing all over with their sexual energy—as long as he doesn't screw them, all that energy gets absorbed by him. There's no medicine as powerful as that for cultivating an old man's *yang*."

"Damn, it's a strange world these days. Not enough brains to imagine that stuff."

"Yeah, but it helps to have plenty of money. Hey, why are you getting up?"

"I've got to go now." As he stood up, Taegi realized that he had gotten quite drunk in that short time.

"Sit down. I'll pay," said Kidong. "Hey!"

Taegi settled the bill, hugged his bag to his side, and staggered out, pushing the tent flap aside.

"Are you really leaving today?" Kidong followed, close by his side, staggering to the same rhythm. "I'll walk you to the station. We can't just part like this, can we?"

They walked, scrawling nonsense on the ground with their footsteps. They crossed the intersection at the walk signal and

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passed a bank with its shutters down, then a brightly lit display window, still open. In front of a dark building that was under construction, the two of them stopped simultaneously. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing a wall, and started to piss. Taegi's stream was a mess—drunk, his penis was like a broken rubber water gun—and it scattered weakly at his feet.

Suddenly, Kidong doubled over. He belched and started puking on the ground. Taegi pounded his back.

Kidong stuck his fingers in his mouth and finished throwing up. “Just look at us!” He got up, tears welling in his eyes, and took his wallet out of his back pocket. He handed Taegi something—a promotional photo. “Look at who it is.”

It was done in imitation of a pop singer or a movie star, a typical ad or a show poster. In the picture, Kidong's hair was beautifully long and he had that oddly crooked smile, one side of the lip curled up in his usual sneer.

“I may look like this now, but I used to have the most fashionable hair at the factory. And this is a secret, Kim. Do you know who did my hair? The top barber in the city. And it was for free.”

Kidong's face shone pale in the darkness. Again he made that gesture with his hand—flipping back his long hair to show it off. But his hair was so short now even the strongest wind couldn't have mussed it, and when Taegi saw that odd gesture it felt as if he had an itch—in that certain spot in the middle of his back where his hand couldn't reach.

“I used to get my hair cut once a week. I'm a model. You know what I'm saying, right? ‘Number One Beauty Academy.’ Once a week I sat up there in front of the students and the instructor did my hair. In the current hottest style.” Kidong made an effort to stand up straight and shook his head as if he had a headache. “I had my hair cut today. It's Sunday and the factory's closed, and as I was coming back after my haircut a cop called me from the local police box. And do you know what he said to me? After I'd just had my hair cut? He said it was too long! And he cited me right there.

But wouldn't you know it—he was a real master at diagnosing my crime.” Kidong giggled, and flapping his arms around, he shouted, “Exhibits antisocial tendencies and clear potential for criminal behavior!”

Taegi looked at the vigorous energy of the booming city, the lights suspended along the street spinning round and round before his eyes. He realized there had never been a time when he was part of it. He was just a part-time employee of the City Sanitation Department. When he dragged the mule from one corner of the city to the other, sweeping up, he was just cleaning up the garbage spat out by the thriving city, a city that had nothing to do with him.

“You know, I realized maybe it was a mistake to bring that animal with me here in the first place.”

“What's that?”

“A city is no place for a mule to live.”

People would gather around the mule and watch, laughing and giggling. Once the mule was aroused it was as if all four of his hooves were staked into the ground—he was helpless and immovable, and his organ, growing to that incredible length, was something they liked to gawk at. When they saw his gun barrel protruding down, frightfully grand, they marveled, they laughed lewdly, they pointed; and the neighborhood brats would throw stones and laugh uproariously. But even then, the mule seemed unconcerned. He would look up at that certain spot in space, piercing it with his gaze, and he exuded a frightening aura, as if he were dreaming something. Why the mule had begun to get sexually aroused in the middle of the city, what he was visualizing behind his eyes, what he was dreaming—Taegi, for the life of him, could not understand.

“What do you plan to do when you go back home?” Kidong asked in a voice now low and gloomy.

For a long time, Taegi looked out at the city's vitality, the darkness growing brighter and brighter. “You know, I never thought about it. I'm just going back there because it's where I was born.”

But when they reached the train station later, Taegi found his path blocked. The waiting room was so jammed with people that he and Kidong had to push a path between them to get inside. A crowd of campers, who looked to be about college age, had spread out so densely there was hardly room to place a foot between them. Taegi realized it was Sunday—they had probably been camping at a nearby sightseeing spot and were on their way home. And now, though they were squatting on the floor waiting for their train, they still exuded the fresh energy of the mountain as they played their guitars, kept time clapping, and sang along. The small half-moon aperture of the ticket window was firmly shut. A sheet of white paper taped above it read, “Today’s tickets sold out.”

“Damn, it’s just like they say,” Kidong complained as he watched the young girls clapping and laughing. “Every time you want to go somewhere, it’s a market day.”

“This isn’t a market day, it’s more like a celebration.”

“If it’s a party, then we’re uninvited guests.” They looked at each other and laughed.

When Taegi saw the closed ticket window, he had had the strange feeling he already knew it would be like this. There was nothing he could do but take the train the next morning.

They walked out of the station plaza as the speaker behind them announced departure times.

“Where will you go now?” asked Kidong.

The light changed at the crossing and people walked out onto the street, but the two of them stood there. Shutters were coming down over the storefronts. The light had suddenly waned into darkness, and people hurried by.

“What wretched luck, huh? Are you going back to your place now?”

“I’ll spend the night here somewhere and take the first train in the morning,” said Taegi.

At the bus stop, people were running back and forth looking for their buses.

“Wait here—just a moment,” Kidong said, suddenly running toward the darkness of the station plaza.

Taegi clicked his tongue. Kidong had a nose like a dog—even in the dark, he had spotted a couple of young women in the distance. He said something to them, and at first Taegi thought Kidong’s charm must have worked, because he could see one of the girls walking back with him. But Kidong seemed oddly reluctant. The girl was clinging to his arm, pressing herself tightly to his side.

“Is this him?”

Up close, Taegi could see the sloppy makeup job on her face.

“Come on,” she said. “We’ll give you the best service.” She tugged on his arm.

“What the hell is this?”

“Well, I thought they were two girls who came to go hiking and missed their train,” Kidong said.

The girl burst out laughing. Busy passersby turned to look disapprovingly, and Kidong stood there not knowing what to do. The girl was clinging to him like a leech.

“I’ll give you a discount. It’s like fate, after all, isn’t it?”

Taegi roughly removed the girl’s hand, but then she grabbed hold of his belt and shouted, like she was making an announcement to everyone, “Look! This man has a tiny penis!”

Taegi cringed, as if he had pissed his pants, and turned around. The girl was still laughing—a properly coquettish laugh. She made as if to bury her face in his shoulder and said in a nasal voice, “Ho ho. . . . You should have cooperated in the first place.”

The girl stood between Taegi and Kidong and walked with her elbows linked in theirs. They turned down an alley of squalid buildings that stretched out, shoulder-to-shoulder, with plexiglass signs reading, “Female Boarders” and “Student Lodging.”

The girl stopped in front of one of the boarding houses. As they stepped inside, a fat middle-aged woman with disheveled hair slid open a frosted window and stuck her face out.

“How many?”

“Two,” said the girl.

The middle-aged woman looked them up and down. A nauseating smell wafted in from somewhere. Taegi avoided her eyes and Kidong lowered his head and let out a quiet, fake cough.

“They have to pay in advance.”

“All right.”

The woman looked them up and down once again, then slid the frosted window shut with a bang.

“Take your shoes off and bring them with you,” said the girl. “Come with me.”

By the light of the mini bulb dangling from the boarding house ceiling, the girl’s face, with its heavy makeup, looked different than it had on the dark street. The dim light brought out a pale carnality that made their hearts beat fast, and the two men were momentarily stunned; they obediently picked up their shoes and stepped up onto the raised wooden floor of the hall. The stairs creaked with each step, and in front of them, the girl’s hips swayed back and forth in synch with the sound.

Kidong abruptly grabbed Taegi’s arm. “Kim. . . I – I’m losing my nerve. What do I do?”

“What are you talking about?”

With a shoe in each hand, Kidong looked at Taegi, and with great effort, he forced a laugh. “To tell you the truth, I’ve never done anything like this before. I’m starting to shake. . . .”

“What are you guys doing? Hurry up!” the girl called from the top of the stairs.

They glanced at each other’s faces. “Damn it. . . .”

Kidong went up the stairs first. As his eyes came level with the floor, the first thing he saw was the girl’s legs. Behind her there was a narrow hallway just wide enough to let a single person pass. More mini bulbs hung from the ceiling. There were three doors. The girl opened the one to the room at the end of the hall.

The same wallpaper pattern, old and discolored with dark blotches, covered the entire room. The ceiling was the same veneer

as the hall with water stains here and there from rain leaking in. On the wall hung a single picture cut from a calendar. An actress smiling, in a suggestive swimsuit that covered her anatomy in such a way that after a first look you would immediately have to look again, more carefully. They stared up at it vacantly, as if by agreement, because it was the only familiar thing in the room. The actress—she was so familiar they felt as if they were in her room; and her naked smile—so gracious, telling them they could have anything they desired from her—quickly put them at ease with their private fantasies.

“Ho, ho. . . . You guys come into a girl’s room and have such grave expressions. Like you’re at someone’s funeral,” said the girl. When she entered the room, the atmosphere seemed less charged.

“There’s two of us. Why only one of you?”

“You worry too much. A girl’s got to get herself properly ready for her wedding night.” She let down her hair, which had been split into two tails.

The second girl came in. She had permed hair, and with her skirt hiked up above her knees so they could have an eyeful, she plopped herself down and handed them the bill for the night.

When they had paid, the girl with the perm said, “It’s time to pair up. The one who’s sleeping with me go over to the room across the hall.” She looked at the two of them one at a time. “Who’s going?”

Her hand hesitated for a moment over Kidong’s knee, but then she gripped and squeezed, making him blush. Kidong stood up, wavering, as helpless as if he were pulled by an irresistible force. The girl laughed and supported him with her arm around his back.

Before the door closed, Kidong turned to look back at Taegi, hesitating, as if he were about to say something. But the girl pushed him, and as he went, the only thing he could communicate was his twisted smile with the curled lip. It seemed to linger even after the veneered door slammed shut.

Taegi sat with his back against the wall, feeling absolutely lost. The tiny room was so stuffy he felt like he couldn’t breathe in it, but

AZALEA

*The
Dreaming
Beast:
Lee Chang-
dong*

at the same time, he felt as if he had been cast out, all alone, onto a vast and empty plain.

The girl got up quietly. She spread out the blankets that were folded up on one side of the room and stood in front of Taegi. Facing him, with a voice full of modesty, she said, “Please receive my greeting.”

She drew her hands together at eye level and slowly knelt, lowering her head. It was an old-fashioned traditional bride’s bow. Taegi watched her, bewildered. “My name is Mija,” she said, still on her knees. “I am at your service.”

Taegi had no idea what to do.

The girl suddenly lifted her head and burst out laughing. “Ho, ho. . . . That expression on your face—you look just like a new groom.”

She walked over toward the wall on her knees and flipped a switch down. Suddenly the room was filled with utter darkness.

Taegi knew exactly what he was supposed to do then, but he could not move his body. All those words, separated by thin partitions in his head, full of restless rustling sounds that came from some unknown place—suddenly they stopped and there was not a single sound.

“You want to hear about a dream I had?” the girl said as she lay there. “I had it last night. In the dream, you know, I wore really nice clothes. I was made up pretty and I was waiting for someone. People were all making a big fuss—brushing my hair and fixing my makeup. The person coming to see me must have been some really handsome big shot. But I didn’t know who it was. My heart was pounding. I was looking at my beautifully made-up face in the mirror, and I just waited for that guy to come quickly. And then I woke up. Isn’t it strange?”

To Taegi it sounded like the girl’s voice came from a dim and distant place. Though he tried to drag his body up to the other side, he was sunk in the depths of the earth beyond the reach of hands. His entire body was paralyzed, stiff—he couldn’t move a finger.

He saw the image of the mule hit by the truck, sprawled out in the middle of the street. Even after death the mule's eyes were still open, gazing upwards as if he were dreaming. What was he dreaming? When he returned after lunch, he knew the mule was aroused again. The neighborhood brats were sitting around him laughing and giggling. His huge penis was stretched out to its full awesome length, long enough to touch the ground. He saw the kids put a long thing up to his penis. It looked like a pole, but by the time he realized it was a metal rod they had heated in a fire, it was too late. The mule raised his head and let out a terrifying shriek. The kids scattered like mountain rain and the mule ran, mad with pain, into the middle of the street, into the flood of backed-up traffic. Though he lay with his head on the asphalt, his eyes were still gazing into space as if he were alive. Those steady eyes, deep in thought and steeped in dream.

"Would you like a Slurpy Bar?" the girl said into his ear, her voice sticky and surreptitious in the darkness. And before he could even be shocked, she pushed something soft and warm into his mouth.

"It's a *real* Slurpy Bar—you can suck it for free. I'm letting you have it as a special treat on the house."

A young woman's breast, unbelievably soft and pliable. Taegi touched her carefully, treasuring her as if she had endured so much wear and tear that she might fall to pieces at any moment. A vague sadness surged through him in waves, and behind it he felt the hot blood coming, filling him. His throat dry with an unbearable desire, he called out to the girl, "Hey!"

"Don't 'Hey' me. Call me by my name. I told you my name is Mija."

The girl stroked him gently. A few strands of her long hair caught between Taegi's lips, and the fishy smell, which made him want to spit and curse, wafted around inside his mouth.

"Mija?"

"Yes, sir?" The girl answered in hoarse whisper, her body pressed close to his.

Taegi swallowed back a wad of hot saliva. “Can you have a baby?”

She made no sound for a long time, but then she let out a high, lilting laugh. Taegi looked into the inky darkness that filled the tiny room, stubbornly waiting for her answer.

“You know, that dream I told you about?” she said, restraining her laughter. “It’s a lie. It’s a story I made up. I tell that same dream to every one of my customers. I tell them I had that dream last night and I ask them to interpret it for me. Every one of their interpretations is different. And each of those times I think things will happen exactly like the interpretation. ‘That’s a big deal! ‘Be careful not to get carbon monoxide poisoning.’ ‘It’s a dream that you’re gonna win big in the lottery if you buy a ticket.’ Do you know what one guy said? He said he was a genuine psychic and the dream meant I was going to have a baby. . . .”

The girl fondled Taegi’s body, her hands methodically covering each and every corner, one side to the other. The inside of his mouth grew parched with desire, and from that certain corner of his body something stood up, squirming. Taegi knew what it was. It was his lifeless, wilted organ, and it was rising—unbelievably—like fresh bamboo shoots poking their heads up through the earth, still damp in the morning with fallen rain. As it grew, Taegi felt an unbearable joy overtake his whole body. It rose, grand and arrogant, towering, pointing up at the sky like the thing he saw across the sewer each morning—the smokestack of the Slurpy Bar factory.

In the darkness, Taegi felt around for her sheath, and into it he slipped his blade, so stiff it was on the verge of snapping.



Taegi opened his eyes at first light. The interior of the tiny room was dimly lit by the morning sun. He could see the dark blotches on the wallpaper. The girl was still sleeping.

Taegi listened for a moment to the quiet sounds of the street—cars, people talking loudly, things he couldn't quite make out.

Now a beam of light pierced the girl's hair, tangled like a wad of threads, and illuminated her upper lip. Her mouth was half open in a faint smile. Taegi put on his clothes carefully so as not to wake her from her sweet dream.

As he walked down the wooden stairs and came out into the alley, the main thoroughfare outside was already congested with traffic. With the morning sun reflecting from their glossy tops, the cars flashed quickly by like silver arrows. It was a fresh morning—for everything. Someone tapped Taegi on the shoulder.

“I thought you had left by yourself,” said Kidong.

Taegi took his hand. They looked at each other like two people just meeting. But Taegi could see Kidong's hair growing, growing beautifully like the mule's mane gleaming blindingly in the morning sun.

“Are you really going?” asked Kidong.