

Stepping-Stone

Poem and Commentary by Heejin Kim

When this uncomfortable silence is swallowing the moment
A glass of wine brings it back up to us
Gulping down the second bottle tickles us
Finishing the third bottle enchants me with your attractiveness
When the new bottle runs dry, the memory of our awkward moment evaporates
Drinking up the fifth bottle, I ask myself why it's only now I found you
Shouting for a sixth bottle, we're kicked out by the nasty barmaid
Only then do we slowly leave the bar.

Spinning round and round,
Are you the one spinning?
Spinning round and round,
No, it's not me, it's you who are spinning
If it's neither you nor me spinning around,
Then aha! It's the world that's spun itself mad.

Before we know it our arms are around each other
It's been a while since we met, but only now am I glad to know you
All those glasses of wine that ran dry
Have become stepping-stones between you and me.

Koreans are well known for their drinking culture. They often enjoy drinking with close friends. But it's also common to make a best friend out of a stranger while drinking. As if trying to prove Koreans' love for alcohol, many *shijo* (short vernacular lyrics) talk about a drinking event or one's love of drinking. "Stepping-Stone" was inspired by the following *shijo* by Chǒng Ch'ŏl (1536-1593):

*Yesterday I heard that farmer Sǒng
from over the hill had new wine.
I kicked the ox to its feet,
Threw on a saddle-cloth and rode up here.
Boy, is your master home?
Tell him Chǒng Ch'ŏl has come to visit.*

(Translation by Kevin O'Rourke)

This *shijo* displays Chǒng Ch'ŏl's cheerful and outgoing nature by describing how he kicks the ox to its feet to ride up to farmer Song's house for a drink. Considering this poem was composed when he was in exile, we can deduce his innate love for a drink in the company of good friends. He is not only cheerful, but very approachable and sincere. Although he is the son of a powerful family, he addresses a peasant boy in a friendly way instead of standing on authority. Perhaps alcohol has a magical power that can disarm the "weapons" guarding the boundary lines built by a society that differentiates and distances individuals of different classes from one another.

"Stepping-stone" similarly shows the cheerfulness and *chǒng* (affection, heart, feeling) that Chǒng Ch'ŏl shows in his *shijo*. Each glass of wine acts as a stepping-stone between two individuals—who may be acquaintances, or then again absolute strangers. Since alcohol makes them invincible in this world, they freely make comments about anything, and readily forgive any comments about them. Thus, the more glasses of wine that are shared, the more easily they open their hearts, and the closer to each other they become.

This poem was written to make readers picture different stories while they read it. The two individuals may have been kicked out from the bar because they ran out of money, because they were only ordering drinks—which can be really cheap in Korea—but not the drinking snacks a customer is expected to order in addition; or because they became so drunk they were ruining the atmosphere. The second stanza was written so readers can guess what the two drinkers have been discussing, since any topic of any depth could pop up: hardships in their lives, unfairness in a problematic society, or maybe they're just talking gibberish. The last stanza also requires readers to use their imagination: After the two individuals have sobered up, what will

happen to the “stepping-stones they put in place last night? Will they have to find a “rat hole” to disappear into when they recall what they said last night? What will happen next?