

Jung-Young MOON

Three tales from *Black Chain Stories*

1.

The Death Bed Prayer

Sensing someone approaching, I opened my eyes and in disbelief I saw an old pitiful dwarf with blinking eyes standing in front of my door. I had no idea how long he had been there. It seemed he was waiting for me to awaken, and when he saw me open my eyes, he came closer and reached out for my hand, but I shook him off and remained lying down.

As far as I knew no superstition existed about a dwarf bringing misfortune to one's house, but I suddenly thought that and got up ready to kick him out.

He wore an uncommonly sad expression, though, and I didn't have the heart to chase him away. This guy's sorrow made me feel dizzy, I thought. And what would make him this sad, I asked myself. Well, dwarfs must belong to a sad race, I concluded. I then suspected that this idea was probably one of my numerous prejudices. The dwarf also looked shorter than his actual size.

What has happened to you...what on earth is the problem, I asked him, since I couldn't understand anything and didn't want to understand anything and tried not to understand anything, as I was still drowsy with sleep. I want you to come with me, the dwarf said, while ignoring my questions. I won't go anywhere, I said, unless you tell me what this is all about, and even though you tell me, I still won't leave here. By the way, where do you want me to go, I asked. You'll see if you come, so get dressed and get what you need together for the deathbed prayer, the dwarf said, as if giving commands to his servant. I was utterly dumbfounded by his attitude, but pretended I didn't mind it at all. As far as I knew, though, a dwarf is not supposed to be this rude.

Now I understood why the dwarf came here, but I still wondered why he came to me of all ministers. I knew I didn't think highly of myself as being a good village minister. Actually, among the villagers I was notorious for impiousness and bad behavior. Even though I perceived that I had a shallow faith, I also knew it was because my soul refuses to be tamed or to feel relaxed and was also because of my belief that true faith means being cautious about what I believe. But most of all, my shallow faith existed because of my laziness, one of the indispensable defects making up who I am. Another rumor concerning my bad behavior was based on a groundless report people made up to incriminate me, proving how rumors are often unfounded. Anyway, I only enjoyed thinking about fornication, as many other people do. And I didn't feel sorry that I was not in a position to talk about my faith or about my moral character.

I couldn't say no one came to the church where I was a minister, but really, only a few did come. Those who couldn't travel long distances to attend other church services due to their physical condition and whose conscience didn't allow them to skip any Sunday service, occasionally came to my church. And I had no interest at all in such things as expanding my religious influence, and thus I stuck to my laissez-faire approach about it. My superiors in the church seemed to have already decided to punish me, but I didn't care about this, either. I didn't want to try doing anything about anything and surrendered to the

meaninglessness of life instead of railing against it. As a matter of fact, I had been living an unpleasant and uneventful idle life for quite some time.

The dwarf must have come to me cautiously to avoid being seen by people. I once more carefully gazed at him and thought I probably met him somewhere, but I couldn't remember where. I kept staring at him, hoping I would recall the meeting, but I failed. I then concluded that I had never met the dwarf before. But suddenly, a memory about a dwarf popped into my mind and I felt better, but my feeling was too weak to be called joyful, so I let go of it. Nothing in common existed between the two dwarfs, except for the fact they were both dwarfs.

The dwarf pressed me to hurry up. This dwarf doesn't know that nothing moves me faster than flattery, I murmured. Far from flattering me, he didn't even utter one single kind word to please me, and even though flattery would work best to move me, it wouldn't be enough, either, I muttered. But since I decided to follow him, I was packing a Bible, a prayer book, and a cross, while wondering if he had any underlying motive for me to accompany him, or whether it was what I even wanted to do, or if I was being forced to do it. Meanwhile, he kept looking at me with an unbelievably sad face. I felt uneasy with his undisguised expression of sadness, but I didn't express my emotion. For some reason, his sadness seemed to reveal his true nature.

What's the weather like outside and where's the wind blowing from, I asked him, while dawdling over coats to wear and this and that. Without any reply to my questions, he seemed to have fallen into deep thought and boundless grief. As I was not good at bearing cold weather, I dressed with layers of clothes and could hardly move around freely.

It was dark outside when we left the house. I didn't even see one single star in the sky. The church, located next to my house, was almost engulfed in darkness and looked like an abandoned ship, nearly submerged in a black sea. When I saw this weird sight, I suddenly felt an urge to flee.

I walked cautiously, like a thief, since I had bad eyesight and suffered from night blindness as well. The dwarf, though, moved his short legs at full speed, as if he had lights in his eyes to guide his way. I thought it was natural that he could see the road better since his eyes were closer to the ground than mine and I was so tall that it made it difficult to clearly see my feet when I stood straight up. I was going to thank him if he held my hand and led me through the darkness, but he didn't and just proceeded on his way. For a moment, I was tempted to escape from him, but he urged me to hurry up as if he had read my mind. I knew that as we got further away from my house the return trip would be proportionally a longer one and this annoyed me. I now regretted I didn't recommend that he look for another minister. On the other hand, since I had already left home and performing a deathbed prayer would be a good deed, I decided to make a quick job of it and return to my warm bed as soon as I could, wishing my bed's warmth would remain until I arrived. If I were more callous minded, I murmured to myself, I wouldn't have followed him to begin with. I had to blame my lack of backbone for my inability to easily brush off other people's solicitations.

We walked up a hill that was actually too low to be called a hill but people called it that anyway. I started yawning, and this made my walking difficult. Loving sleep more than any other thing, I always allowed myself plenty of sleep time, sleep being to me the bread of life. I then and there decided to double my lost sleep time caused by the dwarf. Meanwhile, the dwarf's dim figure up ahead of me repeatedly appeared and disappeared in the darkness.

As we walked over the hill we heard dogs barking angrily nearby and also far away. While listening to the barking, which seemed scattered but actually had a subtle coherent harmony to it, I wondered if any other sound existed that would make me feel the same

restlessness and heaviness that I now felt. Listening to the barking with unplugged ears would be okay, but I listened with my ears plugged up and it sounded like a dim lamentation. I was tempted to scream so loudly that it would defy any sound of this world and would even make someone in heaven frown in order to defeat the unpleasant though endurable barking, but gave up on the idea since I was not alone.

When we began walking over flat land, I smelled fragrant apples and knew that someone's orchard was nearby. It seemed to me it wouldn't be a bad idea for both of us to pick well ripened apples and to eat them, while shutting our eyes to each other's misdeed, or maybe only I would eat an apple while the dwarf watches me, but he quickened his pace as if he had a different idea. So I decided I would scrounge a couple of apples on the way back home. I like apples, but I felt cursed since no one brought me one single apple, even though it was my district's main crop and apple harvest season. I then thought that if this had been a time when the ecclesiastical authority was dominant, I would have taken some apples on the pretext of gathering tithes.

While I was thinking such things, we approached a dimly lit house and the dwarf acted as if we had arrived at our destination and took me inside. I wasn't sure if I had been here before. The dwarf's house was extremely small and I had to almost crawl to get in a certain room. On my hands and knees on the floor and with my legs outside of the room, I looked around inside and saw a woman, who was also a dwarf, lying down at one corner of the room. I didn't see any children of theirs, though.

The dwarf woman had a very pale complexion and seemed to be dying. But her face was somewhat likable. Her eyes were out of focus and looked anxious because of her illness and her fear of death. Looking at her, I felt some kind of sympathy welling up from my heart, a sympathy that was different from ordinary pity.

I remembered my obligation and withdrew my legs from outside the room and kneeled by her and took her confession. You should repent of your sins if you so wish...it's up to you, I announced. She obediently said she wanted to be forgiven, and I, as a representative of God, promised her redemption. But I muttered to myself that I couldn't guarantee her salvation and then proceeded to recite the deathbed prayers without heart.

When I completed my prayers, the dwarf couple held each other's hands and bid their last tearful farewells. Hmm, quite a touching scene, I thought, a moment when the lowly and the holy get along well and when shabbiness and nobility flatter each other. Without mobilizing my scornful remarks, it wouldn't be an easy scene to look at, I murmured. The dwarf's wife died peacefully after saying she'll meet her husband again in heaven. The husband then closed his wife's eyes. While watching them, unpleasant emotional bubbles emerged from my heart that I didn't know how to deal with, but I burst each bubble in my mind with my fingernails, one by one. However, I was somehow touched by her decorous death, which didn't represent, didn't claim, and didn't confirm anything. I, though, gave the warm emotions coming from my heart a cold gaze and sneered at them.

Since I fulfilled my duty, I wondered if there was anything more I could do. Maybe, I thought, I could take the husband's deathbed confession before his death since I was already there, or maybe I could do something to console the widower, calling on whatever means I could. But, as if there was nothing left between him and me, the dwarf virtually chased me out of his house. I did him a favor and expected the equivalent, but sadly, the man thoroughly ignored me. I didn't feel bad about this at all, though. I could feel bad anytime whenever I needed to and whenever I wanted to, but I didn't have the slightest intention to feel that way at that moment.

I grumbled a bit over being kicked out of the house when I wanted to stay a little longer. Standing in the dwarf's front yard, I thought it strange that it wasn't easy to hate dwarfs and that they are truly a beautiful race. Then I thought all things beautiful, including truth, harbored a certain amount of delusion. And for the first time, I felt sorry about myself for not being a dwarf. Soon, however, I remembered the apples and directed my steps towards home. As I once tried before, I thought of forcing myself to perform the difficult task of standing under an apple tree and eating an apple right from the branch without picking it or touching it with my hand and that this would be a funny thing to do. But even though I took the same route back that I had walked with the dwarf, the apple orchard was now nowhere to be seen. Regardless of this, I continued walking back home, asking myself if I had already reached the age where I could hallucinate an apparition. And when I arrived home, to my astonishment, the church had also disappeared; I only saw an empty lot where it once stood. I thought I must've been smitten by some holy curse, but soon entered my house to go to bed, thinking it was in some way a rather good thing that all this had happened.

I, however, didn't know another bizarre happening was about to occur that would astonish me one more time. Once inside my room and without changing my clothes, I slipped my feet under the covers and immediately felt something squishy. When I quickly lifted up the blanket I found a dwarf lying in my bed. Now I'm a person who doesn't easily get surprised but I felt I should be startled at the sight, thinking that either I was going crazy or I was possessed by the devil.

After I barely succeeded getting myself together, I closely scrutinized the dwarf, while muttering that I will end up cultivating patience because of these dwarfs. But I had no idea if he was the one who came to me earlier, or if he wasn't the dwarf who came to me earlier, I maybe had met him somewhere before, or if he was a dwarf who I had never met, or if he was a dwarf who I believed I had met before but actually didn't. I was silently angry at myself for knowing nothing and vented my anger at him. But the dwarf only smiled and said that I looked upset, acting like he didn't care about my emotional state and acting like he was happy or he had nothing to be happy about. I got pissed off and, as I usually do when I become enraged, I couldn't speak clearly, but only asked him what the hell is happening. He, however, pretended indifference, as if he couldn't help me to understand what was going on. When I tried to grab his shoulders to get him up, thinking this kind of slick gangster needed a heftier penalty than a mere admonishment, he shook me off with a big push and I hit the opposite wall with my head before falling to the floor. Lying there, I wondered how he could gather up such strength from such a small body. I glared at him, holding my hands on my throbbing head, but he calmly said that he didn't like me giving him such a look and smiled as if he didn't need to know about my pain and as if he was scoffing at me. Actually, he was scoffing at me and rather repulsively so, too. I was dizzy and couldn't even hold up my head properly.

This house is mine now, the dwarf announced, and you have to accept the fact. Why don't you leave voluntarily, he said, since I don't want to kick you out. And you know, you're a free man and it's a good thing, don't you think so, and if you don't think so, it's your problem. I knew if I approached him he would push me again and I wouldn't dare do anything about it. I was a coward anyway. I finally thought I better do as he commanded, since I realized I couldn't battle him, either physically or by any other means. When I walked to the door, while asking myself why I had to bear such an insult from a dwarf, he fortunately closed his eyes. For a moment I was tempted to appeal to him for mercy and ask him not to throw me out on such a cold night, but my pride didn't allow me to do so.

I'm you from now on, as you're about to vanish, the dwarf said to my back side while I opened the door to leave. I was still angry and slammed the door as hard as I could, almost smashing it to pieces, since it was the only thing I could do. You'll be sorry for taking my place and will get paid back by someone, mark my words, I shouted. But no words came from the room, and I had to restrain the temptation to again open the door.

Once I reached the front yard, however, all my anger disappeared, as if I had somehow known that this kind of thing was bound to happen to me. I speculated on the reason for this happening, but could understand nothing. I then thought that it wasn't the first time that I didn't understand the events occurring in this world. No, I didn't want to stay here anymore, where mysterious things were happening one after another. I left the yard with a somewhat buoyed mind and for the last time I looked back - but the house had disappeared when only a minute before it was there. I stepped into the night while thinking that the grace of God was amazingly boundless. Strangely enough, I felt the deepest joy coming from my inner self, and it seemed to me it wasn't my bliss but God's happiness.

While I was walking, though, it appeared as if the road folded in upon itself as I stepped forward, and I felt there was no place for me to go.

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2.

The Undertaker

It was midnight. Engulfed in gloom and in a stupor, I was lying down on my bed with the lights on when someone quietly opened the door and entered the room. He immediately approached me, and as I tried to get up, he gently pressed my chest down so I couldn't move.

Stay still, he said. I'm the undertaker you summoned. Undertaker, I asked. Yes, he responded. But he didn't look like an undertaker at all. I never asked for any undertaker or anyone to come to me, so you must have gotten the wrong person, I explained. Please leave, I shouted.

Calm down and take it easy, he said. When I began to struggle, he shook his head, as if my effort was useless. And after seeing his shaking head, my will to resist mysteriously vanished. Relax, he said. Relax about what, I cried out again, this time scowling. Everything will be done well, he said. He then opened his luggage, which I hadn't seen him carry into the room. And when he reached out towards the luggage, it instantly appeared in his hand and he began taking out funeral clothes.

Shamefully enough, I was only wearing my underwear. But when I humbly asked him to pick up my clothes from the floor, he rudely kicked them away and, after taking off my underwear, began dressing me in the funeral clothes. I fought him again, while muttering what nonsense this was, but he dressed me quickly, complaining that dead people often asked for the impossible and forgot they were dead. Unfortunately, the funeral clothes fit me just right. So I puffed up my body as much as I could to show him the clothes wouldn't fit, but it was no use. You can't fool an experienced undertaker like me with such a trick, he said. This guy stinks, he then uttered. Well, in this kind of hot weather a body easily decays, he

muttered to himself, as he held his nose and shuddered. But I thought I was the one who had to shudder. I sniffed around, but couldn't smell anything other than the offensive odor that always lingered in my room. It's done, he said, while wiping sweat off his forehead. The only thing left now is traveling to the graveyard, but that isn't a simple matter, he grumbled.

He then easily lifted me on his back and carried me outside. This guy didn't even prepare a casket for me, I mumbled disappointedly, while bouncing on his back. For me the situation was already settled, having completely persuaded myself to accept my death. That I wasn't disheartened that much was maybe because I had always been ready for the most horrible event possible to happen to me. I could say I had lived my life retroactively, beginning from my death. I, however, wondered when I died and tried to remember the event, but it wasn't easy.

It was very cold, with snow falling outside. Inside the house it was summer, but outside it was winter. The two seasons were contending from the two sides of one wall.

In front of my gate a bony donkey stood panting, as if it had been galloping at full speed. The donkey was hooked up to an old wagon rather than a coach, and any chance for the donkey parting from the wagon was unthinkable. Surely, I won't be carried on that; if so, you'll pay dearly, I muttered, with my hand rolling up into a fist. But the undertaker carelessly flung me onto the wagon and then brushed off his hands. My discontent snowballed. I wondered how in hell can this donkey pull this wagon with that ragged body and how can this old wagon travel on this rough road at night. Yes, I worried about the donkey and the wagon. But the donkey had his ears pricked, as if my worry was needless, and he was a strong and able creature regardless of his appearance. Perking up your ears isn't going to give you energy, I said, while laughing at the donkey.

The moment the undertaker sat down in the front seat, the donkey started taking sturdy steps, even before a whipping. Well, I might have to adjust my thinking about donkeys, I thought.

The snowflakes were getting bigger and bigger and the wind was so strong that it wasn't easy to open my eyes in the blizzard. The village was sleeping soundly, oblivious to all this midnight commotion. And even the village dogs were forsaking their obligation to awaken people, I grunted.

We soon arrived at the entrance to the village. But all the roads were closed to us. The undertaker reined in the donkey, commanding it to halt, while he decided which route to take. Suddenly, the moment the undertaker finished speaking, many forked roads appeared in front of us through the snowfall, like when the sea parts to make a path. The undertaker looked down one of the roads and said it is calling us. He then had the donkey take the road.

Once on the road, the donkey seized the darkness and sped along like a bullet. It galloped so fast that I was confused into thinking I was flying and into feeling that the surrounding space was swiftly diminishing or being erased while we remained still. At this speed, we might soon reach beyond the end of the world, I mumbled. But the donkey's pace accelerated, more and more.

Meanwhile, a crazy wind blew and tenaciously pursued us, while I was being rocked to and fro by the jolting wagon, my mind totally blank. The wagon shook terribly, and I felt as if I was shaking the sky. But the more the wagon trembled, the calmer I became.

Would you tell me at least where we're going, I shouted, not only to the undertaker but also to myself, while my mind was becoming fuzzier, but my cry ricocheted back to my ears after being shattered by the strong wind. The undertaker's head now looked like a hard rock in the darkness and snow flakes gradually covered my body like a new layer of earth.

I regained my composure ever since resigning myself to my fate and now looked back at my insignificant life and thought that even the thick snow was insufficient to shield my flaws and faults. I conjured up people and then quickly deleted them from my mind with an absolute indifference, one by one, all those who I had hurt or all those who had caused me suffering.

After awhile, the snow began tapering off and at last stopped. A limitless darkness now spread out in front of us. Even the snowy night's pale gray sky wasn't to be seen. For some reason, the darkness seemed to mimic the darkness at the beginning of all things. And I could feel that our destination was getting closer, but the wagon didn't stop.

The donkey appeared not to be exhausted. In addition, although the donkey was moving forward, it seemed the road we were traveling on now overlapped with the road we had already passed, as if we were endlessly running around in circles in the wilderness. Closing my eyes, I wondered what would happen to me. And when I opened them, thinking whatever happens would be okay, I saw that the undertaker and the donkey were nowhere to be seen. The wind stopped and the loud noise coming from the wagon wheels traveling over the rough road also stopped. Yes, the undertaker and the donkey were no longer with me. They must've abandoned me. Or maybe they were still dashing about in the darkness without realizing I was left behind.

As if still on the wagon lying on my back and as if gliding on ice, I was now alone in the void, floating above the dark space, above the vaporized surface of the earth, all the while experiencing eternity in the serenity forced upon me by infinity. But I couldn't stop, since there was no way to rein myself in, and I had no energy left, either.

Ah, I then finally realized that my grave was prepared in my aimless wandering through the interminable detours of time and space, that my death had existed within my life, and that this enlightenment came to me, a dead person, too late.

Meanwhile, by slowly vanishing, I was becoming complete as absence and silence, perfected as both eternity and infinity.

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3.

The Hunchback

One summer night while taking a walk, somebody came up close to me. Turning around, I saw a short man walking right behind me. I glared at him, hoping to chase him away with my gaze. However, he came closer to me, hesitating a bit, as if he wanted to tell me something troubling.

I slowed down my pace and gave him a closer look. Immediately, his bulging back drew my attention, and to my surprise, I discovered he was a hunchback, though at first I doubted what I saw. Oh, you're a hunchback, I said. As you see, I am indeed a hunchback, he responded, and I have been since the day I was born. The fact I'm a hunchback has always distinguish me from others, he said. For some unknown reason, I was very happy to see the hunchback man. In the darkness his shoulders looked crooked and seemed to perpetuate his abnormality.

He wore an uneasy expression and I wanted to help him, if needed. Is there anything I can do for you, I asked. No, nothing...well, as a matter of fact, there's one thing I would like to ask of you, he said. It's nothing difficult, I think, and even though it might sound unreasonable, would you do it for me: please let me stay next to you until I feel comfortable being all alone by myself, he asked. If I had said no to him, I think he would have clung to my trousers and pleaded or would have knelt down in front me and kissed my feet. Is that all I can do for you, nothing else, I asked. Oh no, that's all, that's enough, he answered. I am walking to the river, I told him, while pointing in that direction. I'll walk along with you, sir, he said. We then began walking together. If you can't bare me being next to you anymore, chase me away, he advised me. Oh no, please don't do such a thing, he said immediately afterwards, in an imploring tone. I won't do that, I promised. Oh good, and I won't disappoint you by talking about the incomprehensible sufferings that I am experiencing, he promised.

He looked like he was having a difficult time walking, so I slowed my pace to keep step with him. I felt I was taking a walk with my young son, but I actually have never taken a walk with him. My son felt ashamed walking with me, and I, in turn, felt the same walking with him. Thinking of my son made me feel sick. The thing I didn't like the most concerning him was that I felt guilty whenever I thought of him. If I didn't have a family, I wouldn't have cultivated this amount of disillusionment, I muttered to myself.

Sir, you must work at something special, the hunchback declared. Am I right...and what kind of work do you do, he asked, while looking up at me. I'm a writer, I answered honestly, suppressing my shameful feelings. Oh, I could tell by how you walk that you must do something special, he said. Through your writing, sir, you probably create infinity as does the universe. I know your writing doesn't reach God, but it would be the same with any prayers you shout out to him, he said. And your writing, which reconstructs life after erasing it, must be the process of releasing the words you've held within you, words previously drawn to silence, he said. When I retorted it's not true, he said it must be true. By the way, what's your name, he then asked. I gave him my name. Oh, I haven't heard of it, and the reason I don't know it must be because of my ignorance, he said.

When he launched into an unpleasant harangue I began wondering if I had to continue walking with the hunchback. Recently, I also have seriously doubted whether I should continue writing, which enlarged my strange inner world while also enhancing my

anxiety. The thing that led me into writing was the emptiness of life, but I was only confronting the emptiness of life with the emptiness of words.

Would you please put your hand on my shoulder, the hunchback asked, and if you so kindly did so, I would be very happy. He said this after already putting my hand on his shoulder, which felt warm through his thin shirt. But for some reason, I wanted to shut my eyes to his brazen conduct. We continued walking, seeing only a few people, and I constantly had to turn my head around to make sure he was keeping up with me.

Oh please, don't give me such a pitiful look and don't feel sympathy for me, since your compassion would be useless anyway, he said. I didn't respond to his request because I wasn't sure if I had any sympathy to offer him.

It's probably not the first time you've seen a hunchback, he asked. No, it isn't, I said. In the old days seeing a hunchback wasn't a rare thing. But as time passed, they became scarce, and I once thought they must've left for their own world, a world unknown to me.

You look like a very uncommon hunchback, I said. No, not at all, he responded, while shaking his head. But it seemed to me, though, that his body shook while his head remained still. Haven't you realized yet that we hunchbacks are all one, he said. We're all tied by the fated word hunchback, and by meeting me you're experiencing all the hunchbacks in the world, he said. If they're all one, I thought, they're all one because of their sorrow.

You may know that we hunchbacks are the ones who live a destined life, he said. But I don't think I'm unfortunate. To me, bearing a grudge against my being a hunchback would be the same as if someone complained about overcast weather, he explained. The one thing I want you to know is that for some unknown reason, we hunchbacks are not very good at being silly and foolish, he said. I could see that he was barely breathing because of his endless talking, stopping for only a moment to take a deep breath to fill his lungs with the air needed to keep talking.

My hand slipped down from his shoulder and was now feeling his hunched back. He didn't say anything about my touching him, and I didn't know whether he hadn't noticed it or had but chose to ignore it. I felt like I was feeling a pregnant woman's belly with a fetus moving around in it. It seemed that another hunchback was being born inside his swelling back. Suddenly, I felt the creator's unfair love for hunchbacks, and I was gripped by jealousy.

You're saying that I'm a poor creature, he said. No, I didn't say anything, I told him. Yes, you said nothing, but your mind is saying so, he responded. This guy can't possibly read peoples' mind, I reasoned. The daytime heat still lingered at night, and I thought of a cool riverside, which quickened my pace. The hunchback's face lit up, more and more, as if he was happy with his unexpected walk with me. His facial color was almost yellow, and I saw it as being the color of delight.

Even though you may deny it, sir, he said, you're a very kind person, since one thing we hunchbacks excel at is in distinguishing good people from others. No, I'm not a very nice person, but I know I'm a silly one, I replied. Oh, don't say that and don't believe it, he said, even though you think that about yourself. I'm just an outstanding fool, I responded. Oh, you're a very humble person, too, he rejoined. Hum, this guy is a master of flattery, I thought. The sky became overcast and seemed primed to rain, and in the ominous darkness, the world was concealing secrets.

By the way, sir, you maybe know something about us hunchbacks, he said. But did you know that we hunchbacks don't dream, and that's because we always dream, which means there's no separation between our dreams and our lives, he explained. I saw lightening beyond the distant mountains and heard faint thundering. Remembering how thundering sounds could affect me, my mind became restless. I endeavored to catch up with my elusive

thinking that endlessly deviated from the moment's circumstances, drifting away from me without any warning, but it was no use.

I can see by your silence that you're now wondering how we hunchbacks sleep. Of course, we don't sleep on our backs, he said. At that moment, a passerby peered at us and the hunchback had to stop talking. Oh, that person is looking at you with more curiosity than he has for me, the hunchback said, but please, don't get annoyed by that, as he can't help being curious. We stopped for a while, and within that brief moment, the hunchback tactfully came to my other side and put my other hand on his shoulder.

We started walking again and before long we reached the riverside and began crossing the bridge. From the other side of the bridge a girl walked towards us, with her long hair blowing in the wind. To me, her hair seemed to rouse the wind, not the wind her hair, he said. How can I not like this guy when he says such things, I thought. The girl, as if we were invisible to her, passed by without even glancing at us. The hunchback now looked very excited. When we arrived at the middle of the bridge, he stopped walking. We both looked down at the water flowing beneath us. Oh, how strange, when I look at the flowing water, said the hunchback, it appears that everything around us is flowing while the water is still, and this is the way I see time in my life. The spot where the hunchback and I were standing on seemed to me beyond any specific place, a nonexistent point. Black clouds hung down very low, and I thought they may descend even lower to engulf us. I again became very confused, feeling that I've never lived beyond the realm of doubt and that this was the only constant in my life, something that has served me as a guide. The dwarf mumbled to himself, but I couldn't understand him. When the thought crossed my mind that the hunchback looked like he was going to die this very night, I shook my head, thinking what a wild and crazy thought.

I wondered if my son was at home. Lately, he fell in love with a girl and came home late, day after day, and I've been thinking of ways to punish him for this. Of course, he didn't cause any major trouble, but I worried about him taking after me. To shake off these swarming negative thoughts, I spit out over the bridge railing.

I now wanted to return home after bidding a good-bye to the hunchback standing next to me, harboring my usual feelings of anxiety that has plagued me for countless nights. At that moment, as if having read my mind, the hunchback began speaking. Please wait a second, he said, I would like to show you something. He then jumped up onto the railing of the bridge, like a cat leaping onto a fence. He staggered, but, as if having grasped the railing with his feet, he didn't fall. I thought he must've once worked in a circus.

He stretched out his arms to balance himself. His body's center of gravity seemed to exist in his hunchback. He was high above the river and could possibly have fallen off the railing, but strangely enough, I didn't worry about him at all. He sang a song which I didn't know and walked dexterously back and forth on the railing, like an acrobatic performer on a circus wire. Contrary to my expectation, he didn't go on to balance himself with his hands on the wire. Believe me, he said, I'm doing this to please you since you've been so kind to me. I told him I'll try to be pleased and, in fact, I did feel somewhat pleased, but gradually I came to feel uneasy and depressed.

Sir, thanks to you, I now have the confidence that I will never be lonely, he said. I'm very happy for you and happy that I did something for you, I told him. I then saw dark clouds draped so low as to almost touch the hunchback's forehead. You might think I'll still become lonely, even after what I said, but if you think so, it would be just your incorrect thinking, declared the hunchback. As far as I can remember, I have never been lonely. I'm not lonely at all. Being lonely wasn't my destiny. In other words, from the beginning I was

devoid of loneliness. If you ever think how happy you are compared to this lonely hunchback, you're making a big mistake. Sir, would you please shout out that I'm not lonely, he asked. I cried out that he was not lonely as he requested, even though I resisted doing so, and at that moment, an intense loneliness pressed down on my heart. What tortured me, though, was not my loneliness, but my firm belief that my loneliness would know no end. I asked myself why I can't be freed from these periods of intense suffering in my life. I thought I might be doing something wrong when I heard thunder coming closer, but at the same time, I seemed to long for it to come even closer. When the lightening lit up the sky, I saw the collapsing night and the shapes of anxiety the night was concealing. And I also saw the night's trembling expression on the hunchback's contorted face, even though he was laughing. Suddenly, he stood still, and I couldn't face him. I imagined a conversation with him where I would say - Oh, I see you're in despair, and he would answer - No sir, strictly speaking, I'm not. As a matter of fact, I'm searching for despair, and in and with my despair, I would become profound and break free.

Sir, do you think God exists, the hunchback asked, while looking directly at me. I'm not sure, I answered. God certainly exists in the impossibility of verifying his absence. Yes, someone has declared that God was dead, but his declaration couldn't prove anything about God's death. In fact, his assertion only affirmed the death of human beings' expectations and faith in God, not the death of God. The hunchback spoke fluently, like a preaching minister. Yes, he had launched into something too obvious. Please, if you're not wanting to hurt my feeling, I said, would you stop talking about God, since when I tried to find myself, God hid me in his shadow. If I hurt your feelings, said the hunchback, I'm very sorry. He looked dejected, but soon his face brightened. Kind sir, I have one more thing I would like you to do for me, and this is my last request, he said. I would like to say my final good-bye to you and would you then please push me into the river, he asked, to back up the frightening decision that I have made with some misgiving. By your doing so, he said, I would then exist nowhere in this thundering night. As if gathering up the overpowering emotions he needed for this moment, he stretched out his arms and, like a professional diver, readied himself to plunge headlong into the water. Please don't be surprised at what I have said, I just want to rest this burden I've been carrying on my back, he said. Strangely, I wasn't surprised at all at his decision and request. We looked at each other for a moment, and during that brief moment, the hunchback's smile - actually, he was barely smiling through his tears, the curved line of his back, my desire to return home, my fatigue, and the night's agitated darkness became entangled and swept me along.

With a little hesitation, really without any hesitation, I light-heartedly pushed his hunched back, as he had requested, feeling as if I was pushing myself off the bridge. He fell, and after a moment, I heard the splashing sound that a heavy stone makes when it hits the water. By then plugging up my ears, I let the horrible sound resonate in my eardrums and captured it forever. For some reason, I felt I was still grasping his hunched back with my hand, and I asked myself how could this kind of incident happen. But soon I realized that all the things that happen to us were things that were always possible to happen, in other words, they happen because they triumph over the impossibility of happening, so that among those things that actually happened, nothing was impossible to happen. And all the happenings occurring outside me, I thought, have no meaning unless they are re-enacted in my mind, where they arouse a response as real as would occur in the actual situation.

The bridge was pretty high up from the water, but somehow I had water drops on my forehead, and this awakened my fear. But while wiping them off, I realized they were rain drops, not water drops from the river. The rain drops were becoming heavier, and I prayed

for the rain not to stop. The hunchback's body, as if it was carrying a heavy weight, didn't rise to the water's surface, and I felt it would never rise again. And in the hunchback's fall I saw all the world's suffering. Once more the lightening lit the world, and in the short lived light, I saw the collapsing world reveal its reality as being a fabrication.

I barely could balance myself while standing, and I thought because someone had died in front of me, things wouldn't be the same as before, and at the same time, I also thought that if I excluded only this night's event from my mind, everything will be the same as before. As if frozen, I stood in the rain next to the railing, while admonishing myself that I shouldn't be sad because such a thing happened, and I wondered what I had left now. Meanwhile, the night hardened with pain.
