

Baek Seok: Poems of the North: :

Baek Seok

Choi Joongwon, Illustrator

Peter Liptak, Translator

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Revealing a hidden light of Korean poetry, the handsomely collected *Baek Seok: Poems of the North* shines with simple and universal splendor, set in the homes, yards, and farmland of twentieth-century Korea.

Peter Liptak applies his extensive skills and experience in English and Korean as he presents translations of the poetry of Baek Seok, who wrote his poems when Korea was occupied by Japan and was later split in two after World War II. Despite such turmoil, his poems focus on universal aspects of Korean culture: harmony with nature, family, love, and sadness. His work was rediscovered by modern scholars in 1987, and his growing reputation prompted this collection.

Baek Seok's poems carry a sense of nostalgia and community, delivered from an individual's point of view. Every line contributes to the whole, painting a picture in words. But Baek Seok's strength is his frugality, as seen in the poem "Green Persimmon," which creates an indelible image in just three lines:

*On a night of countless stars
To the cool current of a north wind
The persimmon fell green to a dog's harsh bark.*

One can contemplate deeper meanings or accept the poem at face value; either way, the strong sense of place and vivid imagery that are omnipresent in Baek Seok's work are evident.

Each poem is printed in English and Korean, accompanied by footnotes explaining references to specific locations, Korean terms, and other details. Choi Joongwon's exquisite artwork illustrates scenes in the book's color scheme of blue and white.

It's hard to imagine a better introduction to Baek Seok's work. A biographical timeline and "About the Author" section provide valuable context, while those more interested in the work itself will delight in the "List of Onomatopoeia," a technique used extensively by Baek Seok.

With *Baek Seok: Poems of the North*, Liptak has proven wrong the professor who called Baek Seok "The Great Untranslatable Poet"; in doing so, he has performed a great service to Western readers.

PETER DABBENE (September/October 2018)

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