

Setting

Unable to tell the whether it is day or night
the characters suffer from sleeplessness.

Moving within a time and space that cannot be distinguished,
they're as hazy as clouds that drift on a white night.

Prologue

White night.

Haze.

In the wind

a bird with a black shadow
perches at the end of a branch
and vomits sand from its beak.

Sand piles on the ground.

Darkness falls.

In the stillness

a flame in a small lantern
grows brighter.

All is quiet.

Act 1, Heunginmun (East Gate)

Scene 1. Inside the East Gate of the fortress

Midnight

*Coming from a distance
the sounds of construction.*

Hammering.

Dry wind.

Nail driving.

Dry wind.

Chisels breaking stones.

On the dry wind

stone dust

gets blown off the rampart

into the fortress.

Stone dust piles on the floor.

Stacking on the foreheads of sleeping people,

a dust haze.

In the room of a house with a straw thatched roof

the flame of a lamp

dances.

A woman

gazes into the rain.

She gives her breast

to the newborn

cradled to her bosom.

Woman: *(Singing)* Sleep baby, sleep

How sweetly you sleep

The dog's head sits on its paws
And into your eyes the moon crawls

Sleep, my baby, sleep
Go to the moon and dream
The moon shines bright here at home
Above our brows the moon roams
Butterflies pick you up and fly away

-Lullaby 1

*At the door the man shakes rain off,
sets an A-frame down from off his back and
listens to the lullaby.*

*The woman stops her song.
She gently rocks the baby to sleep.
Back and forth,
she dozes into her dreams.*

Man: *(Quietly)* Are you asleep?

*The woman wakes.
The man opens the door, brushes the rain off his clothes and enters the room.*

Man: It's hot.

Woman: Real hot.

Man: I'm thirsty.

Woman: The baby too.

Man: Quit it. You don't even know who that thing belongs to.

Woman: I know she's a baby.

And babies need to be nursed.

Man: With your milk . . .

Woman: What about my milk?

Man: Enough already.

Woman: At least I have to try.

Man: Even though you know it's no use?

Silence.

Man: Throw her away. She's dangerous.

Woman: I can't do that.

Man: Just listen to what I'm saying.

Woman: Don't say these things.

Man: Fine. I'll take care of it.

Woman: I'll throw myself down the well if you do.

Man: Haven't we done enough for the kid already?

Woman: We can do it. We can raise this baby . . .

Man: But she's diseased. She's got the plague.

Woman: Seriously, don't say these things. How do you know?

Man: They all die quick . . .

The woman covers the baby's ears.

Woman: She's listening . . . She'll hear you . . .

Interval.

Man: It's been three days.

For three days she doesn't sleep.

She doesn't cry.

She only smiles.

For three days... Just grins.

She's definitely got the plague.

Woman: She's about to go to sleep. Any second...

Man: Even if she survives, she'll become a leper.

Woman: She's going to grow strong. I'm going to feed her my milk.

Man: What milk?

Woman: *My* milk!

Silence

The woman coaxes the baby.

Woman: I never even got to feed her.

Man: Our baby is done for. Dead for sure.

But it's not your fault.

Woman: She can live. If people take turns feeding her.

The man takes the baby from the woman and adjusts her top for her.

Man: Your milk, it's just water. Look. It's all watery . . . This isn't milk. The baby isn't even suckling.

Woman: The milk is going to come. You'll see. Once the baby starts to suck . . . It'll come . . .
Soon . . .

Man: You don't have any milk. All the breasts in the fortress are dry.

Woman: But the doctor said milk would come once the baby starts to suckle . . .

Man: Don't be stupid. Milk only comes to the person that has the baby. You're going to make me cry. Stop talking.

The man sobs.

The woman weeps. She gently rocks the baby.

The baby smiles peacefully. She shuts her eyes.

The flame of the lantern

flickers in the wind.

Silence.

Man: Sleep. Let's sleep. It's late.

Woman: *(Looking at the baby)* She's asleep, finally.

The man rolls the bedding out.

The woman lays the baby down in the center of the bedding.

The man lies down.

The woman lies down.

The man puts out the lantern.

Silence

The man wakes

in the darkness.

Woman: Why are you up?

Man: No reason.

Woman: Can't you sleep?

Man: I still have some work to do. Go on, sleep.

The man begins weaving a straw sandal.

The woman rolls over to face the baby.

She gently pats the baby on the chest.

The baby breathes with her eyes closed.

The woman falls asleep.

The man covertly comes over to the baby.

The man silently picks the baby up into his arms.

The curtain drops.

Scene 2. Under the eaves

People are taking turns passing the baby around, nursing the baby.

A woman opens her jeogori¹.

An old man opens his jeogori.

A boy opens his jeogori.

An old woman opens her jeogori.

They breastfeed the baby.

They open their jeogoris.

Standing side by side

they take turns nursing.

Chorus: (Song/ like a work song)

Open the jeogori

Open the milky grave

The milk that flows freely

Grows baby's hair speedily

You can smell Mom's breath

You can smell Mom's flesh

Standing still in the rain

with a straw bag strapped to her back,

an old woman with a pillow stuffed against her stomach

watches the people sing.

¹ Korean traditional upper garment

Scene 3. Rooftop

Around midnight the gates open.

*Instead of carrying timber on wood frames strapped to their backs
porters carry out the corpses of children who died from the plague.*

Digging pits

shoveling porters

bury children.

*Glancing back occasionally,
they run back inside the fortress.*

Outside the fortress. A forest.

Daybreak. In the East Gate of the fortress.

On the rooftop.

A cow's moo.

Sleeping houses.

*On a rooftop, sleeping in swaddling clothes
a baby is cradled by a man.*

*Gently, he places the baby on the floor
and runs away.*

*In the opposite direction from the running man,
standing on the roof,*

a jester wearing a mask appears.

*He comes over, takes the baby in his arms
and gently rocks the baby.*

*Wrapped in swaddling clothes,
the baby smiles peacefully.*

*The jester paces back and forth on the roof
as if to soothe the baby.*

*While cradling the baby,
as if his movements were a lullaby,
as if he was mumbling with the moon in his mouth,
the jester dances as if to coax the baby.
He stops swaying and
for a brief moment he lifts his head.
He stares at the moon.*

*Shining blue in the darkness, the mask
paces back and forth on the roof.*

*Across from the jester,
dozing in and out of sleep,
young soldier brothers
that guard the watchtower
hide from the rain
underneath a straw sack.*

*They scan the distance for a moment
and lower their heads again.*

Older soldier: You sleeping?

Younger soldier: I'm sleepy.

Older soldier: You're not allowed to sleep.

Younger soldier: I won't.

Older soldier: It's hot.

Younger soldier: It is hot.

Look, people are staring at the sky with their mouths open.

Older soldier: I heard they're throwing dead children away.

Younger soldier: I'm scared. Will they throw us out, too?

Older soldier: Come on. We're not children. We have weapons and we guard the fortress.

Younger soldier: Yeah, that's right. We're soldiers.

Older soldier: But you never know.

Younger soldier: What do you mean?

Older soldier: If we get sick or die, who knows? The grownups might take us to the forest and toss us out too.

Younger soldier: But we're not children.

Older soldier: If we get sick they'll think of us as kids.

Younger soldier: I'm not going to get sick. I'm going to discover who our enemies are and I'm going to fight them.

Older soldier: If we do something admirable, then no one will be able to look at us like kids. Look way out there and holler if you see something.

Younger soldier: I will brother. I have good eyes. I'll keep a good watch. But . . .

Older soldier: But what?

Younger soldier: When is Mama coming?

Older soldier: She isn't.

Younger soldier: What about Papa?

Older soldier: He went to find Mom.

Younger soldier: Do you think he's found her?

Older soldier: Who knows? Even if he did . . . he's not coming back.

Younger soldier: Why not? He knows we're here waiting.

Older soldier: We're all grown up now. We've got to stand on our own two feet.

Younger soldier: I miss Mama. Don't you?

Older soldier: Of course I do, stupid. When we get older and even after that, we'll still miss Mom. We just have to put up with it, that's all.

Younger soldier: Why do we have to put up with it?

Older soldier: Because if we cry people will think we're kids.

Younger soldier: You're scared that they'll throw us away?

Older soldier: No one can throw us away. I'll always take care of you.

Younger soldier: I can take care of you too.

Older soldier: Taking care of someone is for grownups, stupid.

Younger soldier: You're not a grownup. You cry all the time.

Older soldier: That's enough....

I'm hungry. A man gets hungry with all this talking.

Younger soldier: Just suck on a finger like I do. Or think of the smell of Mama's hair.

Older soldier: That's what babies do when they're hungry.

Younger soldier: Come on. You used to suck Mama's finger when you slept. You know you did. And the workers, they suck their fingers too. You know why? Because they're hungry.

Older soldier: You're not supposed to be watching them. You are supposed to be watching the horizon. The horizon at sea and the horizon on land. When you see dust form into clouds, blow the horn.

Younger soldier: Okay, the horizon on land and the horizon at sea.

Brother, are the horizons brothers like us?

Older soldier: They're separated from each other, but yeah, they're brothers.

Silence.

Younger soldier: Brother?

Older soldier: What?

Younger soldier: What are we supposed to do if someone sneaks into the fortress?

Older soldier: We report him to the superiors.

Younger soldier: What if someone is walking on the roof?

Older soldier: If someone is walking on the roof, then he is a thief.

Younger soldier: Someone's walking on the roof and he's got something in his arms.

Older soldier: Thief! What did he steal?

Younger soldier: I don't know. But he's holding it very carefully.

Older soldier: Intruder! Spy! I'm sure of it. We need to make a report.

Younger soldier: Should I blow the horn? He might run. And the king will wake up. And then we'll get punished.

Older soldier: Do you think you can shoot that far with your bow?

Younger soldier: Yeah, I think so.

Older soldier: Take him down then.

The younger soldier

aims at the intruder on the roof.

With the baby still in his arms

the jester is hit in the shoulder.

He falls to the ground.

The baby drops out the jester's arms.

*The jester tries to crawl over
to pick up the baby
but he can't move.
Spirits of the forest try
to carry the baby's shadow away in a basket.
The sound of the baby's crying douses the earth.
Wind.
An old woman approaches. She discovers the baby.
She grins.*

Old woman: Teehee, Teeheee
A baby without teeth.
A toothless baby!

*Darkness shrouds the moon.
Before it gets shut,
a serpent slips through a crack between the two doors of the fortress gate.
The gate closes.*

*Standing in the rain,
the old woman throws away the pillow strapped to her stomach.
She grabs the baby
and stuffs it underneath her clothes instead.
She vanishes into the forest.*

*Outside the fortress, in the forest,
cows quietly moo.*

*A man puts his shovel down and gazes up at the sky.
The cows moo
quietly.*

An aged man digging a hole with a pickaxe

weeps.

In the back of a cart

his old, demented mother smiles.

The aged man puts his pickax down,

embraces his old mother, and sticks her in the hole.

The aged man crouches over the hole. He weeps.

Aged man: I'm sorry Mother.

Go in peace.

You won't have to wait long.

I will join you soon.

My mother. Mother.

My poor mother.

Never forgive me.

Old mother: Teehee. It's chilly.

Teehee.

Aged man: Sleep Mother, sleep

How sweetly you sleep.

Go to the moon in peace.

Remember to smile when you leave.

The mother begins to fall asleep.

*The aged man lifts the shovel over his mother
and drops the shovel.*

He wails.

His mother smiles with her eyes closed.

From the opposite direction, the sound of people singing.

Old woman: Quickly, quickly,

be leery, beware.

Hide every bit
down to the last hair.

*The aged man looks around.
From a distance, the old woman with the baby stuffed inside her shirt glances at him.
In a basket, she is collecting the hair
she cut off with scissors
from the corpses
that were dumped outside the four gates.
Spirits appear beside the bodies of the dead.
They grab hair and place it in the old woman's basket.*

Aged man: Hey, wh-what is this! You're cutting dead people's hair—w-what do you think you're doing?

*Afraid she might see,
the aged man covers his old mother's eyes.*

Old woman: Quickly, quickly, be leery, beware.
Hide every bit, down to the last hair.
Take her out with the shovel.
I'm waiting for the hair of two people.

Old Mother: Teehee Teehee.

Aged man: Crazy woman! You're really nuts!

*The aged man throws his old mother in the cart
and they flee.
With his old mother on his back he abandons the cart.
He runs inside the fortress.*

Several years pass.

Act 2, Sungnyemun (South Gate)

Drought.

*The night is
the sound of trees
searching for leaves
they lost.*

Scene 1. Rampart. Watchtower.

*Workers spread out
sleeping in the open.*

Dry wind.

A beggar turns the pocket of a sleeping worker inside out.

Snoring.

People toss, people turn.

Dry wind.

*Rats crawl over
the stomachs of sleeping people.*

*Hanging at the top
of a fortress gate
is the cut off head
of a man.*

*Inside the eye sockets
flies lay their eggs.*

Rampart.

*A worker shovels
in the darkness.*

A worker pickaxes.

*Without expression,
the face of a worker carrying sand.
Deprived of sleep for several days,
lethargically, drowsily,
slowly tramping onward,
the man carrying sand
takes a step,
stops,
and, one foot at a time, takes another step.*

Watchtower.

*Two young soldiers
lay down next to their weapons
and doze in and out of sleep.*

*At the rim of the fortress
the chief carpenter offers
a cup of pure, sacred water
to the land gods
and to the gods of the mountains.*

Subordinates watch him from behind.

*After bowing several times
the chief carpenter flops to the ground
as if he is dying of thirst.*

*With an expression
like nothing really matters in the world,
the chief carpenter picks up the offering
chugs down the water
and flings away the bowl.*

Inside the fortress. Before midnight.

Rampart. Watchtower.

*Guarding the watchtower, two young soldiers
huddle together.*

They warm themselves by the fire.

Younger soldier: Brother! Brother!

Older soldier: I'm sleepy.

Younger soldier: Don't sleep. It's dangerous to sleep.

Older soldier: I'm not sleeping.

Younger soldier: Well then, what are you doing?

Older soldier: I'm looking at something with my eyes closed.

Younger soldier: What do you see?

Older soldier: Nothing.

Younger soldier: What are you looking at then?

Older soldier: Darkness. The darkness that lives inside a well.

Younger soldier: How can you see a darkness?

Older soldier: You can feel it. You know that feeling when you close your eyes and the moon comes inside. It's like that. It's cold.

Younger soldier: You are right. The moon is cold. It's already down at our toes.

Older soldier: We've got to close the fortress gate.

Younger soldier: Wait a second.

Older soldier: Okay, The wind is about to close the gate for us anyway . . . But, wait! Out there, look! A rain ceremony. They are sinking a tiger head into the Han.

Younger soldier: To make the rain come?

Older soldier: To make the rain come. They're bringing a big palanquin.

Younger soldier: Palanquin? What kind of a palanquin?

Older soldier: The kind that makes you fall asleep if you go inside.

Younger soldier: Brother, what if a lullaby comes out the palanquin?

Older soldier: Don't listen. You aren't allowed to sleep. Cover your ears.

Music comes from the distance.

The high priest lights a fire on some rocks.

Looking down, he blesses

the construction site of the fortress

that the chief carpenter oversees.

The chief carpenter enters the barracks.

Oddly shaped tools for experiments are laid about.

Measured on a specially shaped scale

*the carpenter carefully transfers the blood of wild animals
into a glass bottle filled with mud.*

He shakes up the bottle

and pours it into a cup on the scale.

*He reads the scale,
adds some soil, reads the scale again,
mixes the cup, looks at the scale, completely absorbed in his work,
he seems satisfied and
using the same method, he begins to concoct
a strange brew of tea called "the aphrodisiac."*

Sent from a distance, the priest's grotesque incantations enter the barracks.

*Sprinkling animal blood,
igniting a fire on the rocks,
the high priest on top of an altar makes an offering.
The chief carpenter watches him while sipping tea.
Beside the chief carpenter, the astronomer
cups the chief carpenter's ear
and whispers something.
The astronomer exits the barracks.*

*Coming from the distance
the sound of construction.
The high priest listens intently to a single sound
that has travelled a long way.*

*The high priest enters the barracks.
The astronomer follows the high priest.
And the commander follows the astronomer.
The chief carpenter, between sips of tea, begins to speak.*

Chief carpenter: The rocks are getting hot in the sun.

Commander: The drought is so bad that when you touch a rock, your skin sticks to it.

Chief carpenter: In autumn the mud will become brittle with dew . . . We must rush the completion.

Silence.

Chief carpenter: Have you dealt with the runaways?

Commander: The forest is hiding them.

Chief carpenter: Bring their heads on the ends of spears! We'll make a display of them on the fortress gate! And people can look at them as they pass!

Commander: So that people can look at them as they pass!

Silence.

Commander: *(Trying to be tactful)* Sir, because they are nursed on diseased milk, children are stuffed in straw bags and thrown outside the fortress gates before they even reach their first birthday. The corpses of those that fell during construction are piling up like dead rice. A drought has come and a plague is circulating. Because people don't have anywhere to sleep, bugs lay their eggs and build their nests inside people's bodies. Outside the walls Tatar bandits lick their lips and anxiously wait for a chance to invade. I am afraid. And because I am afraid, I drool in my sleep. All I do is worry. I think about the day when they will invade. I watch the workers. For several nights they close their eyes. They drool. And then they flee.

Chief carpenter: Even if it means stacking people's heads to prop the crumbling walls, we will finish this fortress!

Commander: Even if it means stuffing the heads of dead people in the collapsed wall!

Chief carpenter: Two of the forts have collapsed already. The cut of the stones and the layering are weak. You've got to pay attention to the process of trimming the stones, grading the ground. That's why I, chief carpenter, will oversee this process. I will trim the rocks. I will grade the land.

Silence.

The astronomer comes over to the chief carpenter and dusts off the chief carpenter's shoulder.

Chief carpenter: How many times a day is mud brought up?

Astronomer: They carry mud on their backs when they go up. And they take the bodies of the dead on their way down. The workers are giving their flesh and blood to the construction.

Chief carpenter: Make sure that everything goes according to plan.

Astronomer: Yes, sir. According to plan...

While looking at workers carrying loads on their backs, the chief carpenter speaks.

Chief carpenter: I have been entrusted by the king to handle all matters concerning the construction of this fortress. These gates, the wall, and the ramparts all serve a high purpose. You see they create a border for the king and his internal government. It separates them from the outside world. Even when tempests rage and great boulders fall, we will sweat by day! We'll drool by night! We will complete the walls!

The chief carpenter drinks the brewed tea, some of which trickles down his chin.

The astronomer walks up to the chief carpenter and wipes the tea on the carpenter's chin with his own sleeve.

Commander: What should we do with the young stonemasons? When their parents fall to the ground they weep.

Chief carpenter: Shut up their whines! Stuff stone dust in mouths. Shove dust in their ears.

Astronomer: Yes sir! Without them even realizing it, we'll sneakily poke dust in their ears. And when we shove dust in their mouths, they won't even be able to hear each other cry.

Chief carpenter: Damn right!

The commander, trying to be tactful, makes his exit.

The chief carpenter sits down again at the paduk table.

The astronomer sits down across from him.

*A servant brings in a basin of warm water
to wash the chief carpenter's feet.*

He washes the chief carpenter's feet.

Playing paduk, the chief carpenter and astronomer.

Astronomer: Oh no, I can't believe it. What a move! Your methods, sir, they are dark yet sharp. Vivid yet vague . . . Slow as a stone myself, I can never keep pace. I must say, your white stones have brought me to the edge of the proverbial cliff.

Chief carpenter: (*Putting down a white stone*) You place the stones as if they are so light they are hollow. Tell me Astronomer, because you memorized the trajectory of the stars, do you look to the sky every time you get trapped in a corner?

Astronomer: Oh no, dear me Sir. It looks as if I've lost again!

Chief carpenter: (*Collecting the white and black stones and putting them in their boxes*) Even with all that you learned of the universe, your knowledge can't pierce me, can it?

Astronomer: (*Waving his hands*) Oh, of course not, Sir. When I play against you, no matter how hard I try, I . . .

Chief carpenter: Oh go jump off a cliff! Gather those black stones you bite in your mouth and jump off a cliff. Hehe. Fishy though, dear officer, where is it do you think that I need to put my stones?

Astronomer: The white stone you hold in your hand has turned pale.

Put it where it's empty, Sir. Into the heart of the people.

Chief carpenter: Ah, let's be done with it. Your hands are too soft Astronomer . . . You need to grow some calluses.

The chief carpenter shoves the paduk board away.

Astronomer: Sir, only two months are left. A message sent down from the court says that a new chief carpenter will be appointed if the construction isn't finished on schedule.

Chief carpenter: It'll get finished. I can do it.

Astronomer: Where in this world do things get accomplished by willpower alone?

Chief carpenter: I'm not like you, reading books, not developing willpower. We've gotten this far by stacking stones one at a time, piling them up high. Does it look like Jeong Do-jeon is here in the construction plans, preaching his philosophy of righteousness, propriety, wisdom and benevolence?

Astronomer: Indeed Sir, he is. As you can see, the East Gate Heunginmun lives well, hiding the philosophy of benevolence in its rear hole. The West Gate of Donuimun is also doing well, stomping to the tune of the philosophy of righteousness. Even though they haven't taken the philosophy of propriety into complete consideration, the South Gate of

Sungnyemun hasn't had any major mess ups. And Sukjeongmun, the North Gate, has planted the model of wisdom deep into the ground . . . And that is how our bowels move regularly, by day and by night.

Chief carpenter: Huh huh, really? In this heat the burial mounds of kings are growing so ripe they could crack at any moment. Evidently the people in the fortress haven't been sleeping at night. Is that right?

The astronomer recoils.

Astronomer: Both earth and sky are filled with people nodding off, half-awake.

Chief carpenter: And why is that?

Astronomer: It's because of water. Or should I say, the lack of it. When one doesn't drink water for a long time the nasal cavity grows weak and sleepiness comes. I don't even remember the last time I had a drink.

Chief carpenter: A little rain has to come . . . Broken stones require mud to stick together. Has the high priest's rain ritual failed again?

Astronomer: Sir! You must not believe everything the high priest says. That man is a descendent of butchers, butchers who cut skin straight off the horse's back. And was it not those same butchers, riding their horses, who stirred up a riot, beating people, setting things on fire? It's preposterous to think that this son of a butcher can take an animal's blood or flesh and read the heavens. He has a tongue blacker than the night sky. The fool can't see a thing. The chief carpenter needs to base his predictions on the texts of astronomers—the astronomers, who are, let us not forget, officially approved by the king.

The chief carpenter stares directly at the astronomer, then speaks.

Chief carpenter: Wow . . . Your tongue shoots strong like a sprout. I am curious, where will it stop? Will it become a tree? A forest?

Chief carpenter: Make preparations! A rain ritual will be performed on the fifteenth day of the month. The palanquin to be used in the ritual . . . I will build it with my own two hands. You may go.

The chief carpenter strikes the paduk board with his fist.

The astronomer turns his head.

Astronomer: Damn it, chief! And what about the people! You must quickly make progeny. To appease public sentiment.

Chief carpenter: I have prayed and wished with the sacred water. But it doesn't do a damn thing.

Astronomer: Next month, according to divination, there will be a full moon. When the moon is full you must build a palace inside it.

Chief carpenter: Build a palace inside the moon? Building this fortress is hard enough.

Astronomer: Hehe. Sir, if you look inside a girl's skirt, that is where the moon opens and you build the palace.

Chief carpenter: I'd rather put on a skirt, walk out the fortress gates and live the rest of my life in the wilderness. I don't want kids.

Astronomer: Sir, never say that again.

It is your duty to spread your life into the heavens of men, obey the orders and oversee the construction of the fortress.

The astronomer unfolds the carpenter's clenched fist and begins to read his palm.

Astronomer: You cannot give up Sir.

If you give up, blood will flow from all four gates.

Chief carpenter: Every night I drool. I have nightmares.

In my dreams I watch black hair pour out from my mouth.

Wise astronomer, tell me, when will it rain?

Astronomer: I'm searching for the appropriate date.

People breathe at your command, Sir.

When the four gates are completed, the plague and drought will also come to an end.

Chief carpenter: If only construction is as easy as your advice is syrupy, the fortress would be done already. It's amazing. Your tongue coils around my body as if it was a snake.

Astronomer: Teehee.

Lifting his feet out of the water basin, the chief carpenter.

After drying the chief carpenter's feet with a towel, a servant

picks up the basin and exits.

Chief carpenter: Have you found a baby?

Astronomer: We found a baby with eyes exactly like yours.

Chief carpenter: And?

Astronomer: We threw the baby outside the fortress gates.

Chief carpenter: Are you certain it had the plague?

Astronomer: According to divination, if a baby doesn't cry for three days it becomes a leper. It seems that we found the wrong baby.

Chief carpenter: It didn't cry?

Astronomer: No. The plague enters the mouths of adults and is transmitted from their mouths to the mouths of children. Even when they are being born, the babies in the village don't cry. Afraid of the plague, people dig holes and secretly stick their children in them.

Chief carpenter: While they are still alive?

Astronomer: They are soon to be dead.

Chief carpenter: Jeez. Burying infected babies while they are still alive, that is the real plague. It's unimaginable.

Astronomer: Sir, even if we say you've had a baby, no one will believe us. You need to do it yourself, root the seed inside human flesh . . .

Chief carpenter: I said I'm not going to have children.

Astronomer: Sir, let's see, what would be a good night for you know, you and a woman, sharing breaths, breathing together . . . just one time . . .

Chief carpenter: Stop it. I'm not interested.

Astronomer: Sir, you must show signs of the desire for fetal movement, to set people's minds at ease. You must plead on the altar with the sacred water.

Chief carpenter: Pleading does no damn good.

Astronomer: *(Turning his head)* Damn it all . . .

Silence.

Astronomer: It is a white night. Our window of opportunity will be open to us again soon. We astronomers will prepare another rain ritual. We will call the musicians of the town and set up tiger heads outside the four gates.

Chief carpenter: Set up tiger heads? Isn't that the high priest's job?

Astronomer: It's an easy job. Astronomers can do it too.

The astronomer exits, trying to be tactful.

Chief carpenter: That man's prophecies drip with honey and blood. He hovers around me absentmindedly like some disloyal guard. His words disappear in the air like flower pollen. He's no different from the young king.

*The chief carpenter heads out of the barracks
and walks in the direction of the high priest.*

*The high priest stops his ritual
and with his back turned to the chief carpenter
he looks to the distant horizon.*

Chief carpenter: *(In a friendly voice)* Can we talk?

High priest: There is a sound entering this fortress.

Chief carpenter: What sound?

High priest: It rides on the wind and flows into the ears of sleeping people.

Chief carpenter: All I hear is the sound of spikes being driven into stone, the sound of stones being stacked.

High priest: Not once has this sound gone to sleep. It's approaching here with its eyes wide open.

Chief carpenter: Do you speak of the clippity clop of the hoofs of the horses that float around the fog outside the gate?

The high priest shakes his head.

Chief carpenter: I'm not scared.

High priest: Every time the sound drifts here, the fortress wall begins to bawl. The secrets of nature hide this world in a dream.

Chief carpenter: *(Drawing a sword from his waist)* If it interferes with our construction, I'll cut it in two.

High priest: You can't slice sound with a sword.

Chief carpenter: I'll bury the sound in mud.

High priest: Even inside mud, sound seeps out. Accumulates.

Silence.

Chief carpenter: Are you positive the sound is coming here?

High priest: Chief carpenter, this is a sound you have been waiting for all your life.

Chief carpenter: But the pulse of my heart beats only with the thrums of the chisel, the beat of the hammer.

High priest: The mud is weeping.

Chief carpenter: Where?

High priest: Where do you think?

Chief carpenter: I can't hear it.

Silence.

Chief carpenter: Why is he coming back?

High priest: Because it's time.

Chief carpenter: Quick, close the fortress gate. Don't let him in.

Silence.

The chief carpenter drinks tea.

High priest: You've got to stop drinking that tea. The subjects are lodging appeals, saying that you're losing your mind. You've been mumbling strange things to yourself.

Chief carpenter: They're prying into my affairs because they want to set me up. The court doesn't trust me.

High priest: Every night you follow that sound in your dreams. That's why.

Chief carpenter: You can see that?

Silence.

The chief carpenter raises his sword. He looks at the tip.

Chief carpenter: There will be blood.

Silence.

Chief carpenter: I will soak the fortress wall in blood. Those men in the palace don't know the workers' calluses. I'll show them! The fortress will be complete. Until the day mud gets in my eyes, my fate cannot be changed!

High priest: Until mud gets in your eyes . . .

Looking down on the rampart, the chief carpenter.

The high priest exits.