Excursion to Jiri San before the mid-term holiday

My son-assistant’s growing up –
instead of mountain-climbing with me
he’s choosing three days with the group
that’s heading to an island in the Yellow Sea.
At a highway petrol-station
we’re bundled into different buses; through window glass
we wave and lip-read: Take care, take care.
My bus climbs up through rice paddies;
the students shout and eat.
A teacher mimes: San is mountain (ten fingertips touch)
we’ll walk a long time (two fingers scuttle)
we’ll sleep (head flops)
we’ll snore.
Our bus shudders to a halt;
my Mother Mountain journey can begin.
(Across the peninsula on a stony beach
does my son pitch his tent
and swim?)

Into the forested slopes the teenagers race;
the teachers too. ‘Go! Go!’ I tell them. ‘Don’t wait.
Meet you at the shelter!’ I imagine a small stone hut
built by wandering poet-monks ten centuries ago.
Alone on the path to Honghwahwonn
a billion leaves fill my slow sky.
Listen to the water flowing by.
Joy on joy.
As darkness falls, I hear a rustle – a bear?
Strange not to hear my students call, ‘Sem! Sem!’

There are no trees now; only a chaos of boulders.
The air is cool and each kilometre
takes a long long time.
It is my life I’m walking.
On, on, questing, fearless. Embodied
but not bound by earth. Joy on joy.
A wow of stars stutter in the black sky, and the kind moon
tosses me a ribbon of her light.
I round a boulder. What strange spectacle is this? It’s a national parks shelter as big as a stadium with a helicopter pad and signposts and offices! Park benches line the building’s front and there beneath electric light my fellow-teachers are happily drinking rice wine. They toast my arrival. ‘Jiri San?’ I ask. Yes, yes. No no. It seems Chonwangbong, the peak, is elsewhere. Snore first! I’m led upstairs. The floor is a vast paste of women’s bodies; on the ground floor must be the men. So! Instead of a solitary path to a poor poet’s hut this huge mountain’s braided with tracks and they all lead here. Why my school has chosen the most isolated way I’ll never know, but I’m in their debt for life. The strip of floor I’m given is the size of a baby’s cot. I collapse but in this vast hall of rest, amongst so many strangers, sleep does not come. My turn to bolt:

Farewell and happy holiday
I’m off to Chonwangbong by moonlight.

How bright the journey! Here under the swirling stars is a lunar movie of countless human shadows – I’m not alone in navigating boulders, bound for sunrise; only the foolish sleep past midnight on Jiri San. Our footsteps beat: Give us the sky! Nothing but sky! Give us the blessing of the sun. We pilgrims reach the top. In the murky dark on cold outcrops beneath a weight of cloud, we squat – families, school-friends, workplace mates. Then, out of the dense night-cloud three Warrior Dragons come a-thrashing, warning: Beware! We guard the Gates of Heaven! And from all directions, Divinities come a-wooing: Tiny people from the Earth realm observe this Jewel, our home! In their presence we Worldlings rise up, and in one breath implore the sun, ‘Now! Now!’

O. Heaven’s flying open – the molten lantern of the sun! Gold light pours over all: Korea! me! you! us!
A crowd gathers, embraces, dances, sings the National Anthem, soccer war-cries, love-songs. New friends shake hands. We laugh with the joy of the pure – we are reborn!

The clouds are clouds again. The day applies its bleach and bids: Back now, to the World. Down I go, a goddess, happy in my realm of pink azaleas, stone steps, trees and leaves … Life’s given me this opportunity – and I’ve seized it. Bend knee. Lower boot. Beat, happy heart.

Mid-morning now, almost lunch; and down the rock steps young men come galloping. In centuries past, the men who ran on Jiri San were monks, training their bodies and their minds; now they’re corporation men in company T-shirts who’ve slept late and missed the sunrise. Down, down I go … past temples, under leaves that offer their billion blessings. Bend knee, lower boot and sing:

Oh Jiri San Oh Jiri San
I feel your beauty striding in me
back back back to the Ordinary World.

In Duncheol
I couldn’t be more exhausted. My son’s reported on the Yellow Sea and is again off beneath birch and oak playing ‘catchy’ with the squirrels. On my bed in the house, I adopt the yoga Corpse Pose. I know my youth is gone; will my knees ever bend again? A week passes. School re-opens and the news gets out, ‘The most unlikely, terribly old, English Conversation Teacher saw sunrise from Chonwangbong.’ I bask in mutual astonishment: Such an ordinary foreigner (and certainly one no longer young) yet granted an audience with Heaven!

Lesley Synge

Jiri San: Mt Jiri is mainland South Korea’s tallest mountain but the national park in fact encompasses a series of mountains. San means mountain and ji-ri can be translated as ‘exquisite wisdom’. It is said that the mountain has transformative powers; just by visiting, foolish people can turn wise. Honghwahhwon: a National Parks shelter close to the summit of Mt Jiri. Chonwangbong: the eastern peak, 1915m.