

Lee Chang-dong: This Crumbling World, This Support That Keeps Us Standing

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Translated from the Chinese

Academic English Translation · Chicago Notes–Bibliography

A director of Lee Chang-dong's stature would probably make for an unusually generous giveaway question on a film history examination. There is no need to cram: one can simply set down his films in order. Adding 2025's *Possible Love*, there are fewer than ten. I have not yet had the chance to see the new film. As for the earlier ones, I would not claim that every one remains before us in vivid detail, but look up a plot summary on Baidu and certain images immediately rise to mind. An ordinary viewer, after a first screening, can improvise a few comments. Yet the moment one tries to say more, one senses almost instinctively that his films are not as simple as anything one can manage to say about them.

For a long time, watching Lee Chang-dong was accompanied by precisely this difficulty of articulation. It reached something of a crest with the release of *Poetry* in 2010. When that film, with a different kind of force, pushed me back into life, I suddenly realized that the elderly woman in it—possessed of a poetic sensibility yet never able to exhaust what she wishes to express—is in fact all of us in life. Life spreads and blurs, disorderly and forever sprouting new complications. What form of expression could make inward feeling commensurate with outward speech? Unable to achieve that equivalence yet unwilling to resign ourselves, we resemble her and continue searching. The search has not been without rewards; it has also meant returning to Lee's earlier work. Each new Lee Chang-dong film seems simultaneously to unlock another door into the films that came before. It sends one back to the Lee Chang-dong “peppermint candy” preserved by the years, looking backward and digging deeper across three intertwined strata: the age, the work, and one's own life.

In matters of style, some directors announce themselves with drums and banners and are therefore unmistakable; others work so unobtrusively that their style is scarcely noticed. Lee inclines toward the latter. In this respect he differs from Kim Ki-duk, another director who entered the field of vision of Chinese audiences at almost the same time. Kim thought in painterly terms, and during the most forceful period of his career his visual narration did possess an arresting power that seized the viewer at once. Yet as the films accumulated, a fracture between narrative and image became increasingly visible. The characters' tendency toward obsessive self-immersion produced a further estrangement that made them still harder for ordinary viewers to understand. A Korean critic once summarized the problem vividly: Kim Ki-duk's characters and ordinary people were simply “not born under compatible stars.”¹ Lee, who began as a novelist, is more attentive to the audience in this regard. His narrative bridge is always soundly built, and along it lie countless details that viewers can recognize without being told. To use Lee's films as a window onto Korean society is certainly more dependable than to use Kim's. Gradually, however, the referential reach of Lee's films has extended beyond Korean

1 The source attributes this characterization to an unnamed Korean critic but gives no critic, publication, or date; the attribution therefore remains unverified. The idiom 八字不合 (*bazi buhe*), literally “the eight characters do not match,” derives from traditional birth-date divination and means that two parties are fundamentally incompatible.

society to encompass the world through which we ourselves are moving—a world that grows ever more inexplicable. Lee’s characters also invite unusually strong identification. They too may be marginal, small, and apparently beneath notice, yet anyone can feel that they belong among “ordinary people,” undergoing encounters and perplexities that could befall any of us and reaching, quite naturally, for the answers that ordinary people seek when events overtake them.

In one sense, the reason we do not register a forcefully asserted style is precisely that Lee achieves an equilibrium between image and narrative, allowing us to enter without resistance the world he wishes to speak of. Taking that world as reality, we also begin to sense a directional metaphor—a suggestion of where things are headed. The implication is still clearer in his then-new film *Burning*. Encountering his cinema again after *Poetry*, nearly a decade later,² I doubt I will ever forget that night in the theater. As the plot slowly tore itself open and the characters’ fates tugged at me, fear was gradually drawn forth and intensified by imagination. The sound design was thread-thin yet seemed to strike through bone and draw out marrow. The heart grew fragile as a torn drumhead, and something fell without end through the rupture, vanishing like snow without even an echo. I woke the next morning still seized by that sensation. It did not feel like an illusion. It felt like the world in which we live. The young woman had fallen into a hole we cannot see, and no one could pull her out. Late in the film, the novelist played by Yoo Ah-in delivers the stab that gives the audience a moment of retaliatory catharsis. Yet after turning the film over repeatedly in my mind, I prefer to understand that fatal act as an imagining written by the young novelist within the film. A man sustained by mysterious power, living with complete ease and able to decide lightly whether others exist or disappear, would hardly meet so simple an end. That is my judgment. A force of disintegration has always been present in Lee Chang-dong’s cinema, acting on the course of reality and pushing it toward a particular kind of fall. *Burning* showed me that force again—this time almost as acceleration itself.

I. Divided by the Bridge: Train Sounds, Near and Far

A man rides home on an old green-painted train. A gust of wind lifts a female passenger’s red gauze scarf from the carriage ahead and blows it against his face. This way of joining two destinies at the outset of a film, and this use of a prop, appear in *Green Fish* (1997), the first work in what Chinese critics often call Lee Chang-dong’s “Green Trilogy.”³ Viewed now, the scene is saturated with nostalgia. That is partly because such old trains are disappearing, and partly because the red scarf can carry a Chinese viewer in a single breath back to Lu Yao’s *Life*.⁴ Within *Green Fish*, however, the train performs a ferrying function. It bears Mak-dong, a discharged soldier after years of military service, back into a reality—and a time-space—that has already changed.

2 *Poetry* was released in 2010 and *Burning* in 2018. The source’s “ten years” is a rounded rhetorical interval; “nearly a decade” preserves its force while recording the exact chronology. Festival de Cannes, “Lee Chang-Dong,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/p/chang-dong-lee/>; Korean Film Council, “LEE Changdong.”

3 “Green Trilogy” (绿色三部曲) is a label common in Chinese-language criticism for *Green Fish*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *Oasis*. It is not presented as an official trilogy title in the Korean Film Council or Korean Film Archive filmographies. Korean Film Council, “LEE Changdong”; Korean Film Archive, “Green Fish (Chologmulgogi),” accessed July 31, 2026, https://eng.koreafilm.or.kr/movie/PM_009043; Korean Film Archive, “Oasis (Oasisu),” accessed July 31, 2026, https://eng.koreafilm.or.kr/movie/PM_009045.

4 Lu Yao’s *Life* (人生), first published in 1982, is a landmark Reform-era novella about rural-urban aspiration and the choices facing a young man in social transition. The author invokes it here as a shared Chinese visual memory. Lu Yao, *Life*, trans. Chloe Estep (Seattle: AmazonCrossing, 2019).

The image of train and track is strengthened in the trilogy's second film, *Peppermint Candy*, because its repeated return links the protagonist's seven episodes of life as though a tape were being rewound. Each stretch of rail winding out from a tunnel leads toward an earlier memory. Of all Lee Chang-dong's films, this is the one most saturated with the memory of an era. The years 1999, 1994, 1987, 1984, 1980, and 1979 are anything but ordinary temporal markers for Koreans. Many Korean films confront the country's democracy movement, military coups, constitutional changes under Chun Doo-hwan, and financial crisis head-on. Lee, however, renders such matters with concrete particularity only in his fiction; in his cinema they remain a dim background behind the characters. He would rather make his protagonist more ordinary—so ordinary that he seems almost unaware of these great events. Yet when the wave of the age strikes, it strikes these apparently peripheral figures all the same. They are especially vulnerable because each male protagonist has been cut off from reality for several years, whether by military service, as in *Green Fish*, or imprisonment, as in *Oasis*. When he reenters the world, he is already psychologically off the rails.

Carrying the innocence and justice cultivated by an earlier age, Mak-dong intervenes on the train when he sees a woman working in the nightlife trade being harassed by hoodlums. From that moment, his fate is drawn away from his hometown and toward the metropolis of Seoul. To him, each step seems to welcome him into a new life. To the viewer, each step takes him deeper into the trap the new world has prepared. He falls in love with his gang boss's woman and is then used by the boss—a narrative trajectory reminiscent of the Hong Kong screen classic *The Bund*.⁵ It does not collapse into cliché because by then we have already sensed Lee's acute grasp of the defining features of the age's transformation, and the vast, desolate anxiety he plants within it. When Mak-dong first returns after demobilization, the old tree beside his family home still stands, and beyond the neighboring dirt road lies a sweep of fields. By the end of the film, Mak-dong is dead. The old tree remains, but high-rise buildings now stand where the fields had been. The house by the dirt road has, as he wished, become a family restaurant, and the family appears to continue its life in "peace." Yet when a few faint train sounds reach the ear, one cannot help wondering whether what now runs on the new rails can possibly be the old green train. Recall, too, how soon after his discharge Mak-dong rode in his second brother's egg truck to sell eggs in a housing development. Looking around, he once sighed, "This is our land." The longer one thinks about what this family may encounter next, the more frightening it becomes.

The "new" world is a world piled up by money and capital, and the stage Mak-dong encounters is still one of savage reaping. The force that removes whoever becomes an obstacle must still work through primitive gang warfare, displayed muscle, and competitions in ruthlessness. Mak-dong is a veteran; he still possesses a young body and a loyalty that can be put to use. Once he loses that value, however, he is sacrificed. He is therefore among the earliest people in Lee Chang-dong's cinema to be made to "disappear" from the real world. If we view Lee's films diachronically, the process of disappearance is still something the audience can see.

The same destruction remains visible in *Yong-ho*, the protagonist of *Peppermint Candy*. For him, the world is divided into above and below the bridge. Beneath it, a reunion picnic can be full of warmth and laughter; above it, trains hurtle past. The desperate man, solitary as a wolf, can only stand among the bridge girders and, in the last howl of his life, cry: "I want to go back."

5 The source calls *The Bund* a Hong Kong film. The best-known work under this title is TVB's twenty-five-episode television drama, first broadcast in 1980; a film version assembled from the series appeared later. The translation uses "Hong Kong screen classic" so as not to repeat the genre error silently. myTV SUPER, "The Bund (I)," accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.mytvsuper.com/en/programme/thebundi_102428/The-Bund-I/.

Unlike the innocent Mak-dong of *Green Fish*, Yong-ho in *Peppermint Candy* passes through several social roles. He first works in a factory, then serves in the army, becomes a police officer, and later goes into business. He has a first love, a wife, and an affair; he moves house several times and ends at last in a plastic-sheet shack built beneath a bridge—perhaps the same kind of structure that Ben, in the later *Burning*, could make disappear with a casual flame. The rise and fall of a man within society, nested within a series of emblematic dates, remains Lee Chang-dong's narration of an age.

Mak-dong and Yong-ho are, in the end, both people who do not fit the “new” world. To their colleagues they are impediments; at friendly gatherings they are spoilers. Most fundamentally, they are people whose moral unease is steeped in shame. They cannot simply follow the current and slide into a prescribed track because they have preserved in their hearts certain concrete images of innocence.

II. Tragedy Begins with the Vanishing of Those Emblems

Before Mak-dong goes to kill on his boss's behalf in *Green Fish*, he first uses a lighter to burn the red scarf belonging to the woman he met on the train—a scarf he once tried, unsuccessfully, to return. Likewise, when Yong-ho meets his first love after interrogating a prisoner in *Peppermint Candy*, he is no longer the person he once was. Feigning indifference, he gives back the camera she had presented to him. These are the moments in which innocence is lost, and they are already preludes to acts of destruction.

Lee Chang-dong's characters move us in part because he gives each of them a tangible emblem of innocence with which the audience can resonate: peppermint candy, a red scarf, the tapestry of an oasis hanging on a wall in *Oasis*. There is also a “green fish” in *Green Fish*, but it appears only in the telephone call Mak-dong makes to his elder brother after killing for his boss. Ordinarily, having completed a boss's assignment, a subordinate reports to the boss. Mak-dong calls his brother instead. In this impoverished family, the brother has a severe motor and speech disability resembling that of the woman in *Oasis*. Yet in the joyful interaction of their reunion after a long separation, he seems to be the one relative whose essential nature has not changed, the one person Mak-dong can trust without reserve. On the telephone Mak-dong recalls a children's song containing the image of the green fish. It, too, is tied to a bridge: “When I was little, under the bridge, I went fishing for green fish. I lost a slipper and searched and searched for it.”⁶ In the countdown of his life, Mak-dong knows more clearly than ever that the green fish may be desirable, but the shoe is indispensable. People forget what is fundamental in pursuit of something fine, only to turn back and search for it in vain. This is the same impulse as Yong-ho's cry in *Peppermint Candy*: “I want to go back.”

Lee Chang-dong's minor figures are crushed in this way beneath the speeding train of historical change. What fills us with limitless sorrow is precisely the moral sense in them that has not yet been worn entirely away.

As though taking pity on viewers who had tasted too much bitterness in the first two films, Lee closes the “Green Trilogy” with *Oasis* and offers the audience the bracing green olive of a love story of unalloyed purity. The male protagonist likewise returns to reality after a period of isolation. He seems innately slow to take in information and determined to go his own way. Kind and simple, he tells no one in his family when he leaves prison and wanders onto the winter

6 The source alternates between 绿鱼 (“green fish”) and 绿头鱼 (“green-headed fish”) while paraphrasing the nursery rhyme in *Green Fish*. Because the source supplies no subtitle edition against which the dialogue can be established, the translation regularizes both forms as “green fish” in order to preserve the film-title motif.

street in a single thin layer. He has almost no money, yet uses what little he has to buy his mother a coat from a street stall. Before beginning a new job, the first thing he thinks to do is visit the family of the man killed in the traffic accident, because he feels guilty. In fact, his younger brother caused the accident, and he has taken the rap. The brother has a wife, a child, and a job. He has none of the three, and already has a record; he makes the more plausible fall guy.⁷

Guilt joins two people whose fates had nothing to do with one another, while drawing a clear boundary between him and the relatives most closely connected to him. “Who told you to feel guilty?” his brother demands when he sees that he is still in contact with the victim’s family. On the other side, the disabled woman’s brother uses her housing entitlement to move into a new apartment and leaves her behind in the old house, yet feels no guilt at all. When he catches the two lovers having sex, he stages a tremendous public display of grief and rage—probably in hopes of extracting still more money. The moral mutilation wrought by a society of desire reverses the paired categories of the “normal” and the disabled. Here again we see Lee’s ethical anxiety about the age, although the film’s most radiant element remains its fairy tale of love between two marginal people. Having already seen Moon So-ri and Sol Kyung-gu together in *Peppermint Candy*, we find their performances in *Oasis* still more dazzling, because neither is recognizable as the performer we know. Moon So-ri, playing the disabled woman, reveals her own limpid beauty only in the film’s transformed fantasy sequences. The radio and the branches broken from the tree outside are the two visible signs of love. Outsiders cannot read them and have no wish to do so. The police, called in to arrest the suspect, arrive with a string of foregone conclusions and pronounce the case closed in their minds. Right and wrong no longer matter. The lovers still have love.

For a time, Korean cinema was synonymous with images that delighted the eye and set the heart racing: handsome men and beautiful women, desire on the verge of love and infatuation on the verge of madness, as though no directors in the world handled these states better. Yet to render a relationship that outsiders regard as aberrant with full emotional and psychological credibility is not something any director can accomplish with ease. In *Oasis*, the characters’ feelings advance by exceedingly fine degrees—fine as the shadow cast by the tree branches outside onto the tapestry within. The male protagonist’s escape from the interrogation room is so gripping because shadow-like code words have already been planted in advance: one lover is the exorcist who climbs the tall tree and saws away its branches; the other is the answering presence who moves her body and turns the radio to its highest volume.

This oasis fairy tale can be counted among the consummate achievements of film history. That is due not only to its distinctive system of secret signs, but also to the fact that its other elements are not founded on any lofty transcendence of the earthly world. Apart from several imagined scenes, the two characters fit their environment down to the smallest seam. Relatives, police officers, neighbors, the grocery-store owner—their discrimination, coldness, misunderstanding, and occasional kindness are merely the reactions of “normal” people moving along prescribed tracks. Against them, the lovers are another kind of derailed existence. Lee, however, gives them a fairy-tale ending that functions as a countershot to the first two films.

7 顶包 is colloquial Chinese for accepting blame or punishment on someone else’s behalf. The adjacent shorthand 三无 (“three no’s”) is unpacked in the translation as “no wife, no child, and no job.” The underlying hit-and-run substitution is confirmed in the Korean Film Archive synopsis of *Oasis*: Korean Film Archive, “*Oasis* (Oasiseu).”

Their inability to communicate normally with others, together with their moral guilt, becomes instead a suit of armor. If they possess love and guard it, the oasis remains with them.

III. “Meaning” Is the True “Secret Sunshine”

At different stages I wrote one essay on *Secret Sunshine* and another on *Poetry*. Because both protagonists are women, their circumstances and their thinking resonate strongly with me. We tend to like the women in Lee Chang-dong’s films more than those in Kim Ki-duk’s—please forgive me for returning to this comparison. The untamed Kim Ki-duk once appealed to me greatly as well. In an obstinate existential mode, he displayed the actions of his characters whether or not the viewer could understand them; some critics have chosen to read this as a form of theatrical confinement. What I mean is that even when Lee Chang-dong’s characters appear on a stage, the actors are of the kind who can extend an invitation to the crowd. At any moment, one of them might rush down from the stage and ask a spectator: What would you do if it were you?

Yes: the women in *Secret Sunshine* and *Poetry* both encounter a “major event” in life and must question themselves and others. One is an elegant young piano teacher who, after her husband’s death, moves from Seoul to the small city of Miryang in hopes of beginning again. She chooses to parse the Sino-Korean characters of “Miryang” literally and imagine it as a place of “secret sunshine.”⁸ Yet it is precisely there that she suffers the devastating abduction and murder of her child by someone around her. In *Poetry*, the protagonist is an elegant elderly woman with the heart of a young girl. She assumes that, alongside caring for her young grandson, she can attend a poetry class and recover the poetic sensibility of her youth. Then a case in which a schoolgirl was raped comes to light. Her grandson was among those involved, and the girl killed herself by jumping into a river. The implicated parents and the school have no wish to confront what happened; they discuss only how to turn a major crime into a minor incident.

The question for the first woman is how to emerge from the devastation of her own life and whether she should forgive the offender serving his sentence in prison. The question for the second is how to face the fact that someone close to her has inflicted fatal harm on an innocent girl—and whether, under such circumstances, continuing to write poetry can still be moral.

As marks of their times, the residents of the small city in *Secret Sunshine* are already engrossed in the development plan for a vacant tract of land. The child in the elderly woman’s household in *Poetry* plainly resembles a “left-behind child,” left at home while the household’s main wage earner works in a larger city.⁹ Yet the center of gravity of the two women’s thinking differs from the doubts that arise in Mak-dong and Yong-ho. “Is life beautiful?” When Yong-ho asks this question, he is already close to sliding from the frustrations of life into destruction. When women suffer a blow, by contrast, they instinctively look for a point of support in prayer and conversion, then gradually extend that search toward connection with the lives of others. It may indeed be true that men are creatures of existence; women, meanwhile, live more for meaning. This is one of the truths spoken by Lee Chang-dong’s cinema. Even the young woman in *Burning* who appears most materially minded repeatedly distinguishes the Great Hunger from

8 Miryang is written 密陽 in Sino-Korean characters: 密 can mean “secret” or “hidden,” and 陽 can mean “sun” or “sunlight.” Lee’s official English title, *Secret Sunshine*, activates this literal reading. Festival de Cannes, “Lee Chang-Dong,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/p/chang-dong-lee/>.

9 留守兒童 (“left-behind child”) is a Chinese social-policy term for a child who remains in the home locality while one or both parents migrate for work. The author applies the term analogically to the Korean household in *Poetry*; the translation retains it with that cultural qualification.

the Little Hunger when she imitates a dance she saw while traveling in Africa: “The Little Hunger is a person who is physically hungry. The Great Hunger is a person who hungers to find the meaning of existence.”¹⁰ The elderly woman in Poetry commands our respect and sorrow not only because she faces life’s problem honestly, but also because, through the pursuit and experience of poetry, she enters the life of another person and feels that person’s pain. In the end she completes the poem with her life and makes amends for her own moral debt. The piano teacher’s problem is caught at the level of the forgiveness signified by God. Her later actions seem to arise from the thought, “Before I had even said I forgave him, he said God had already forgiven him.” Yet ultimately those actions still resemble an attempt to find a way to live through rupture.

IV. Should We Try to Praise This Damaged World?

On my most recent viewing of *Secret Sunshine*, another fact drew my attention. The heroine moves from Seoul to Miryang because it is her husband’s hometown. Yet before the child’s death, the film contains no scene of her interacting with her mother-in-law. Their only meeting is beside the cremation furnace after the child has died, where the mother-in-law berates her as a daughter-in-law. It is evident that her relationship with her husband’s family of origin is poor. Leaving aside whether the mother-in-law is then living in the same small city, the deeper question is this: Did her husband love her at all? Her younger brother states directly that he did not. She insists that he did. By temperament and profession alike, the piano teacher is sensitive and impulsive. She is accustomed to suggestion, especially self-suggestion; once it succeeds, she defends the resulting conviction to the end. When that belief is shattered, her counterattack is fierce. Soon after she joins the church, she already seems suffused with happiness, and we as viewers find the moment suspicious. Later, she naively believes herself ready to forgive the perpetrator, only to find that he appears wholly unconcerned. Her ensuing series of rebellions against God is therefore consistent with her emotional logic: stealing a CD, seducing a church elder—the husband of the woman from the pharmacy¹¹—and then propositioning Mr. Kim, who loves her. She seems intent on violating the catechism’s seven deadly sins one by one, and the sequence continues until she slashes her wrists and is taken to the hospital.

The first time she goes for a haircut after leaving the hospital, the stylist turns out to be the murderer’s daughter. Her temper erupts again, and she leaves in fury. She then happens to encounter the owner of a clothing shop. The owner has changed the shop’s color on the strength of her earlier advice, and business has indeed improved. She thanks her and adds casually, “Whatever happens, you can’t walk out of a hair salon looking like that.” That one sentence finds its way into her. In the final scene, she cuts her own hair—this time with a genuine suggestion of beginning again. Mr. Kim arrives at just the right moment and holds the mirror steady for her. The scene takes place in a courtyard. The camera slowly leaves the mirror and moves toward the ground, where weeds grow in disorder beside a small patch of standing water, and a wash of sunlight lies across it. When I wrote about this ending before, I took it as a suspension of fate.

10 The Little Hunger/Great Hunger distinction is dialogue from *Burning*. Commercial subtitle editions vary slightly; this translation follows the semantic content quoted in the Chinese source rather than imposing the wording of a single subtitle release. Lee Chang-dong, dir., *Burning* (2018), film.

11 The source calls this figure a “male pastor.” The Korean Movie Database identifies him as the pharmacist’s church-elder husband (약사의 장로 남편). The translation uses “church elder” and records the source-level discrepancy here. Korean Movie Database, “Miryang” (밀양), accessed July 31, 2026, <https://kmdb.or.kr/db/kor/detail/movie/K/08753>.

This time I am more inclined to think that she is pondering something. Earlier, the Christian woman at the pharmacy tried to console her by speaking of God and pointing toward a shelf: “Look—even within that layer of sunlight, the Lord’s meaning is hidden.” She dismissed the claim: “Isn’t it just sunlight? There is nothing there but sunlight.” At the time she saw nothing. In between came a hundred turns and a thousand reversals. Whether something is there or not may no longer require argument with God. To borrow two lines from an old Chinese poem: “Within all this there is a true meaning; / I would explain it, but have forgotten the words.”¹² Those who have lived through things tend to trust life, that great teacher, more.

From piano teacher to poet to novelist: in his later films Lee Chang-dong increasingly brings artistic “creators” like himself into the frame. They cannot control the course of events, but they are better than ordinary people at apprehending, observing, and expressing. They can therefore make their attitude and their power more visible.

From the airport pickup to the later encounters in the café and at the gathering outside her home, Lee gradually shifts Jong-su, the novelist in *Burning*, from the role he imagines for himself as the young woman’s boyfriend, to that of her platonic male confidant,¹³ and finally to that of an observer present at the scene. We do not feel embarrassed for him. This is due in part to the credibility of the young Yoo Ah-in’s performance. It is also because, like Jong-su, we come to recognize his position as a novelist. A novelist wants to probe the world’s deepest secret: that it is so, and why it is so. The elegant, fit Ben is therefore brought before him by the woman he loves. “How did he get this far at such a young age?” That is the aspiring novelist’s question, and ours. From this point onward, the novelist’s presence admits us into Ben’s world. Lee’s division of the world makes another unmistakable leap forward. The older world, in which one conquered by displaying muscle, has likewise been cast into a vanishing abyss. The world before us now is controlled by a mysterious power, yet covered by a soft halo from which the air of killing is absent. Violence exists only in conversation: every two months or so, Ben burns a useless plastic greenhouse, all for the sake of amusement. It causes no great disturbance because the police have no time for such marginal matters. The logic of Ben’s behavior, so far as the film allows us to glimpse it, is weightless as a murmur in a dream. That very lightness fills us with terror. The novelist does not panic. He continues to trace and infer, even pursuing the truth of the young woman’s story about whether she fell into a well as a child.

Asked to choose a shot from the film to revisit, most viewers would probably select the young woman’s nude dance in the courtyard at dusk. It is beautiful and elusive, like a single instant of this world. The image I want to keep, however, is the novelist sitting in her small room and writing after she has disappeared. It is a long shot; all we can see is that he is facing a computer and writing something. Yet to speak is to exist, and speech is meaning in itself. Perhaps this is the only hold we possess on an uncertain world, and our only response to it. Across Lee Chang-dong’s two films, the promising young novelist and the elderly woman whose life and poem are completed together seem to salute one another from afar. In another courtyard stands the woman who teaches piano, cutting her own hair. As she goes on teaching children, what

12 The couplet is from Tao Yuanming’s “Drinking Wine, No. 5” (饮酒·其五): 此中有真意，欲辨已忘言. The English rendering in the body is newly made for this translation. Tao Yuanming, “Drinking Wine, No. 5,” *Chinese Text Project*, accessed July 31, 2026, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?chapter=165213&if=en>.

13 The source’s 男闺蜜 is a contemporary Chinese colloquialism. Literally evoking a male member of one’s intimate “boudoir-confidante” circle, it denotes a woman’s very close, usually nonromantic male friend. “Platonic male confidant” conveys the function without importing the Chinese gendered domestic image.

sounds will she draw from the piano? Whatever the answer, I still want to recite a line by Adam Zagajewski: “Try to praise the mutilated world.”¹⁴ For within beautiful images there remains something that proves our power.

¹⁴ The quoted English line follows Clare Cavanagh’s published translation. Adam Zagajewski, “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” trans. Clare Cavanagh, *New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/try-to-praise-the-mutilated-world>.