



Maninbo: Peace & War

Ko Un

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?Ko Un has long been a living legend in Korea, both as a poet and as a person. Allen Ginsberg once wrote, 'Ko Un is a magnificent poet, combination of Buddhist cognoscente, passionate political libertarian, and naturalist historian.' Maninbo (Ten Thousand Lives) is the title of a remarkable collection of poems by Ko Un, filling thirty volumes, a total of 4001 poems containing the names of 5600 people, which took 30 years to complete. Ko Un first conceived the idea while confined in a solitary cell upon his arrest in May 1980, the first volumes appeared in 1986, and the project was completed 25 years after publication began, in 2010. Unsure whether he might be executed or not, he found his mind filling with memories of the people he had met or heard of during his life. Finally, he made a vow that, if he were released from prison, he would write poems about each of them. In part this would be a means of rescuing from oblivion countless lives that would otherwise be lost, and also it would serve to offer a vision of the history of Korea as it has been lived by its entire population through the centuries. A selection from the first 10 volumes of Maninbo relating to Ko Un's village childhood was published in the US in 2006 by Green Integer under the title Ten Thousand Lives. This edition is a selection from volumes 11 to 20, with the last half of the book focused on the sufferings of the Korean people during the Korean War. Essentially narrative, each poem offers a brief glimpse of an individual's life. Some span an entire existence, some relate a brief moment. Some are celebrations of remarkable lives, others recall terrible events and inhuman beings. Some poems are humorous, others are dark commemorations of unthinkable incidents. They span the whole of Korean history, from earliest pre-history to the present time. Poetry Book Society Recommended Translation.

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