

**EXCERPT FROM “SONG FOR A DEAD SISTER”**  
**By Wŏlmyŏng**

**Introduction**

*Hyangga* were oral Korean-language poems of Silla and early Koryŏ that were later written down using *hyangch'al*, a form in which Chinese characters were used for both their meaning and sound values in order to represent the very different structure of Korean. Only fourteen *hyangga* from the Silla era survive.

In this example, dating from the eighth century and drawn from the *Samguk yusa* (“Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms”) — a chief source for understanding the history and culture of this period — the Buddhist monk Wŏlmyŏng offers a song for his deceased sister in conjunction with a memorial ritual. The song both speaks of common aspects of human existence and gives a sense of the Pure Land Buddhism that was one of the important religious currents of late Silla.

**Document Excerpt with Questions**

From *The Book of Korean Poetry: Songs of Shilla and Koryŏ*, translated and edited by Kevin O’Rourke (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006) 17.

*Excerpt from “Song for a Dead Sister”*  
**By Wŏlmyŏng**

You left  
on the life-death road,  
with no word  
of farewell:  
we are two leaves, torn  
by early autumn winds  
from a single tree,  
scattered who knows where.  
Let me abide in the Way, I pray  
until we meet in the Western Paradise.

**Questions:**

1. What aspects of existence do the images of the poem — the “life-death road,” “no word of farewell,” “leaves ... from a single tree,” “early autumn winds” — come to terms with? How do you think they helped Wŏlmyŏng find meaning within his grief?
2. Specifically, what sense does the poem give of the basic nature of the world in which human beings live?
3. The Western Paradise, or Pure Land, is a central aspect of the belief and practice of Pure Land Buddhism. What can it be compared to? How do the meanings and religious yearnings central to Pure Land Buddhism compare to other sorts of Buddhism you may have studied?