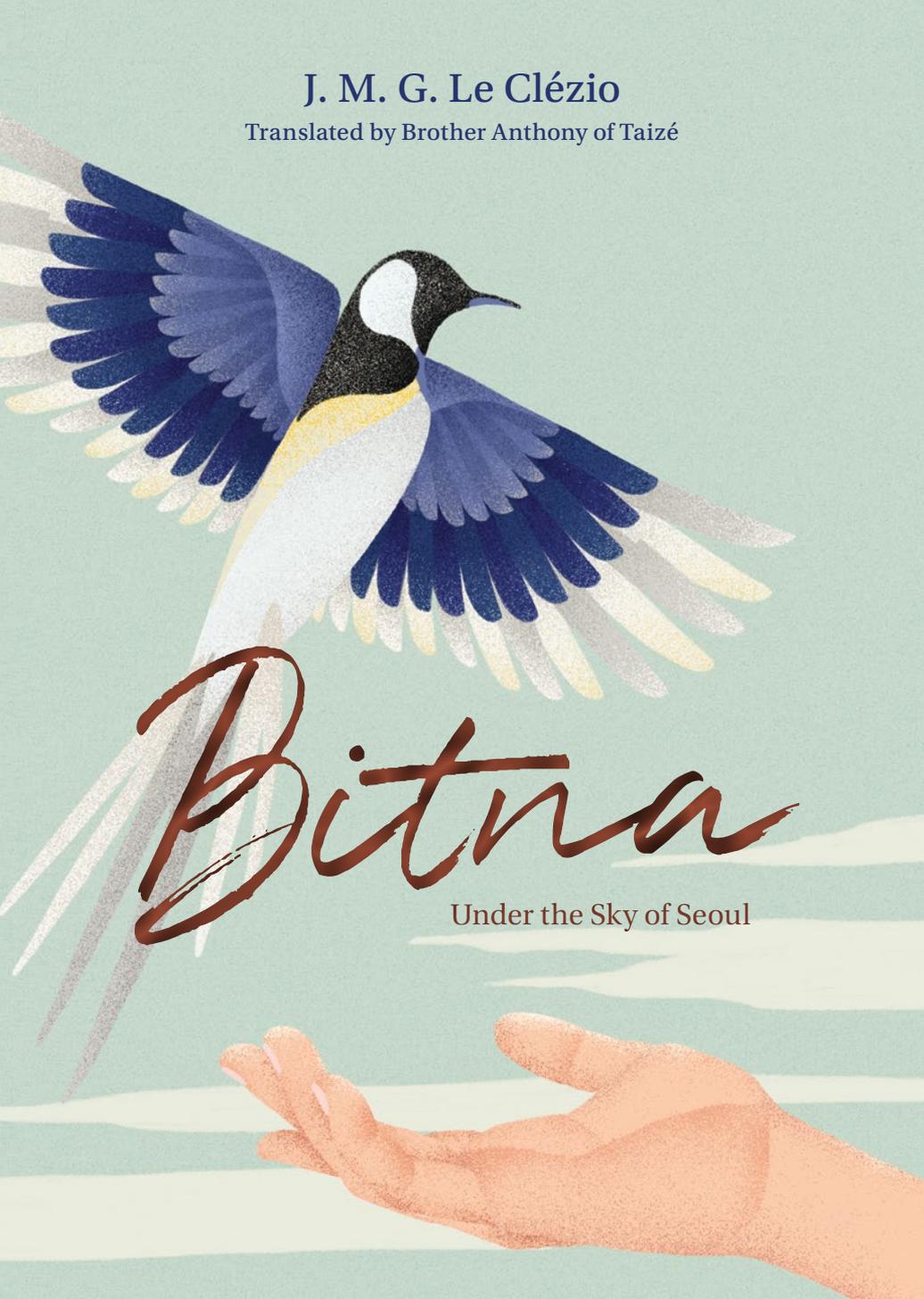


J. M. G. Le Clézio

Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

A stylized illustration of a bird with blue, white, and yellow wings flying over a hand reaching up. The bird is the central focus, with its wings spread wide, showing a mix of dark blue, light blue, and yellow feathers. Its body is white with a black head and neck. Below the bird, a hand is shown reaching up, palm facing up, in a light orange-brown color. The background is a light greenish-blue with horizontal bands of white and light green, suggesting a sky or a landscape. The overall style is soft and artistic.

# Bitna

Under the Sky of Seoul



One day or other we'll meet again under the sky of Seoul.



I am grateful to Brother Anthony of Taizé  
for his translation and his work in perfecting my novel.





My name is Bitna. I am nearly eighteen years old. I cannot lie, because I have light-colored eyes and it would show immediately. My hair is also light-colored. Some people think it's been bleached with peroxide, but that's the way I was born, with maize-hued hair, because my grandmother suffered from malnutrition, as did my mother after her. I was born down in the south, in the province of Jeolla-do, in a family of fishermen. My parents are not rich, but when I finished my secondary schooling, they wanted to give me the best education, and for that they wanted a top-ranking SKY university, and took out a loan. For my lodgings, I had no problems at first, because my aunt (my father's elder sister) agreed to let me stay in her tiny apartment in the Hongdae neighborhood, right next to Hongik University, where I shared a room with her daughter, named Baekhwa.

I give these details because it's this situation and this neighborhood that were the origin of my later adventures and perfected my education as much as the lessons of my professors. For in that little room I discovered just how much wickedness, jealousy, cowardice, and laziness a person can conceal.

Baekhwa was a few years younger than I was, and I quickly realized that I had been invited to live in the house so that I could take care of her. In the beginning, it was simple requests: "Bitna, you're so reasonable, couldn't you make sure your cousin does her homework" (or tidies her room, or helps with the housework, or says her prayers, or washes her underwear). But gradually the suggestions became more insistent recommendations ("After all, you have to set an example, you know") and finally straight orders: "Bitna! What did I tell you? Go get your cousin, and prepare lunch for her!"

This situation quickly became intolerable. Baekhwa did exactly as she pleased, and her name, meaning "White Flower," did not suit her at all. At the age of fourteen, the only thing that interested her was her own person. She spent hours examining her reflection in a little magnifying mirror, ready to deal with any skin imperfections, redness, or pimples, which she

pressed with cotton swabs to extract the pus and then dabbed at with alcohol wipes, before hiding the scars under a layer of concealer covered with foundation. She was a real expert in cosmetic medicine.

It was a battle at every moment, with my long diatribes telling her what she had to do invariably ending in shouts and tears, or fits of anger, when Baekhwa threw everything she could find at my head, or sometimes out of the window—plates, glasses, even knives—and I dared not look outside to see if anyone had been killed. Then I had to clear up the wreckage, and also endure the reproaches of my aunt: “You’re so ungrateful. After all that we’ve done for you, all that we’re doing to help you in life. If it wasn’t for me, you’d be begging in the street. Or you could go back home to your family down in Jeolla-do, scaling and gutting fish in the marketplace.” What could I say to that?

It was at that time that I began to roam about the city. The courses at the university only take up part of my time. I spend the rest walking the streets, or undertake long journeys by bus and subway. At first, I went out to forget about my family problems, the filthiness of the room I shared with my cousin, and my aunt’s incessant reproaches. The moment I

leave the apartment, slamming the metal door and descending the steep steps leading to the street, I feel freed of a burden. I breathe more freely. I have energy in my legs, and I am smiling.

The street is my adventure playground. In my little town down in Jeolla-do nothing much happens. The center is just one or two streets, with a few shops, mainly food stores, and a few restaurants; life stops at five in the evening, and the busiest moment of the day is early in the morning when tractors arrive pulling carts filled with cabbages and onions. We live to the rhythm of the festivals, three times a year—the Lunar New Year, the spring festival when we repair the family graves, and the autumn festival of Chuseok. When I arrived in Seoul, I felt as if I had entered a new world. The various neighborhoods are surrounded by wide avenues, along which flows an endless stream of cars and buses, speeding off in all directions. On the pavements the crowd is so compact that I learned to walk without banging into the people coming from the opposite direction, which means, given my size (I measure 1.56 meters and I weigh 43 kilograms), jumping to one side and sometimes even stepping off the sidewalk. At first, I would accompany my aunt in her shopping, or

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The beautiful and the ugly abide side-by-side in Le Clézio's Seoul. Through various stories told over the course of the novel by Bitna, a countryside teenager new to the city, we discover with her that life in Seoul is a complex adventure, in which love and bitterness, life and death mingle in beautiful, unexpected ways. We discover Seoul from above as well as from within, and the novel even takes us as far as North Korea, in a dream that overcomes division. By the end, Bitna comes to see that parting and death, too, are fundamental aspects of life, and we sense that she is ready at last to set out on her own adventure in the vast city of Seoul. Fulfilling a long-held dream to write a novel set in the city of Seoul, Le Clézio proudly presents *Bitna: Under the Sky of Seoul*.

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