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MODERN FICTION

III

Cho
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Hwang Sunwŏn

Hwang Sunwŏn was born in 1915 in Taedong, South P'yŏngan, and graduated in English literature from Waseda University in Tokyo in 1939. His literary career began with the publication of a collection of verse in 1934, but since 1940 he has written mainly short stories and novels. A member of the Korean Academy of Arts since 1957, Hwang is currently a professor at Kyŏnghŭi University in Seoul.

A master of the modern short story, Hwang has attempted to capture the images of his people in lyrical prose and delicate natural imagery. In his early stories, Hwang dealt with children and their rites of passage, the impact of their discovery of death, the consciousness of beauty and ugliness, the knowledge of good and evil, and the awakening of love and sex. In these stories Hwang either employs traditional symbols or creates his personal symbology. Hwang's novels encompass such local and universal topics as the conflict between landowner and tenants (*The Descendants of Cain*, 1954) and the alienation of a member of the untouchable butcher class (*The Sun and the Moon*, 1964) to show how one "must endure and overcome one's own loneliness." All Hwang's works are characterized by his ear for the speech patterns of all classes and ages, an eye for telltale gestures, narrative sophistication, and beautifully chiseled prose with seductive rhythm. The background of "Cranes" (1953) is the Korean War. Two young men, childhood friends from the farm, are now in different roles: one is a security officer and another, a prisoner suspected of underground activity for the North. But like the crane that soars high into the sky, friendship transcends ideological differences.

CRANES

The northern village lay snug beneath the high, bright autumn sky, near the border at the Thirty-eighth Parallel. White gourds lay one against the other on the dirt floor of an empty farmhouse. Any village elders who passed by extinguished their bamboo pipes first, and the children, too, turned back some distance off. Their faces were marked with fear.

As a whole, the village showed little damage from the war, but it still did not seem like the same village Sŏngsam had known as a boy.

At the foot of a chestnut grove on the hill behind the village he stopped and climbed a chestnut tree. Somewhere far back in his mind he heard the old man with a wren shout, "You bad boy, climbing up my chestnut tree again!"

The old man must have passed away, for he was not among the few village elders Sŏngsam had met. Holding onto the trunk of the tree, Sŏngsam gazed up at the blue sky for a time. Some chestnuts fell to the ground as the dry clusters opened of their own accord.

A young man stood, his hands bound, before a farmhouse that had been converted into a Public Peace Police office. He seemed to be a stranger, so Sŏngsam went up for a closer look. He was stunned: this young man was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tŏkchae.

Sŏngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch'ŏnt'ae for an explanation. The prisoner was the vice-chairman of the Farmers' Communist League and had just been flushed out of hiding in his own house, Sŏngsam learned.

Sŏngsam sat down on the dirt floor and lit a cigarette.

Tŏkchae was to be escorted to Ch'ŏngdan by one of the peace police.

After a time, Sŏngsam lit a new cigarette from the first and stood up.

"I'll take him with me."

Tŏkchae averted his face and refused to look at Sŏngsam. The two left the village.

Sŏngsam went on smoking, but the tobacco had no flavor. He just kept drawing the smoke in and blowing it out. Then suddenly he thought that Tŏkchae, too, must want a puff. He thought of the days when they had shared dried gourd leaves behind sheltering walls, hid-

den from the adults' view. But today, how could he offer a cigarette to a fellow like this?

Once, when they were small, he went with Tökchae to steal some chestnuts from the old man with the wen. It was Söngsam's turn to climb the tree. Suddenly the old man began shouting. Söngsam slipped and fell to the ground. He got chestnut burrs all over his bottom, but he kept on running. Only when the two had reached a safe place where the old man could not overtake them did Söngsam turn his bottom to Tökchae. The burrs hurt so much as they were plucked out that Söngsam could not keep tears from welling up in his eyes. Tökchae produced a fistful of chestnuts from his pocket and thrust them into Söngsam's. . . . Söngsam threw away the cigarette he had just lit, and then made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tökchae.

They reached the pass at the hill where he and Tökchae had cut fodder for the cows until Söngsam had to move to a spot near Ch'ön-t'ae, south of the Thirty-eighth Parallel, two years before the liberation.

Söngsam felt a sudden surge of anger in spite of himself and shouted, "So how many have you killed?"

For the first time, Tökchae cast a quick glance at him and then looked away.

"You! How many have you killed?" he asked again.

Tökchae looked at him again and glared. The glare grew intense, and his mouth twitched.

"So you managed to kill quite a few, eh?" Söngsam felt his mind clearing itself, as if some obstruction had been removed. "If you were vice-chairman of the Communist League, why didn't you run? You must have been lying low with a secret mission."

Tökchae did not reply.

"Speak up. What was your mission?"

Tökchae kept walking. Tökchae was hiding something, Söngsam thought. He wanted to take a good look at him, but Tökchae kept his face averted.

Fingering the revolver at his side, Söngsam went on: "There's no need to make excuses. You're going to be shot anyway. Why don't you tell the truth here and now?"

"I'm not going to make any excuses. They made me vice-chairman

of the League because I was a hardworking farmer, and one of the poorest. If that's a capital offense, so be it. I'm still what I used to be—the only thing I'm good at is tilling the soil." After a short pause, he added, "My old man is bedridden at home. He's been ill almost half a year." Tökchae's father was a widower, a poor, hardworking farmer who lived only for his son. Seven years ago his back had given out, and he had contracted a skin disease.

"Are you married?"

"Yes," Tökchae replied after a time.

"To whom?"

"Shorty."

"To Shorty?" How interesting! A woman so small and plump that she knew the earth's vastness, but not the sky's height. Such a cold fish! He and Tökchae had teased her and made her cry. And Tökchae had married her!

"How many kids?"

"The first is arriving this fall, she says."

Söngsam had difficulty swallowing a laugh that he was about to let burst forth in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many children Tökchae had, he could not help wanting to break out laughing at the thought of the wife sitting there with her huge stomach, one span around. But he realized that this was no time for joking.

"Anyway, it's strange you didn't run away."

"I tried to escape. They said that once the South invaded, not a man would be spared. So all of us between seventeen and forty were taken to the North. I thought of evacuating, even if I had to carry my father on my back. But Father said no. How could we farmers leave the land behind when the crops were ready for harvesting? He grew old on that farm depending on me as the prop and mainstay of the family. I wanted to be with him in his last moments so I could close his eyes with my own hand. Besides, where can farmers like us go, when all we know how to do is live on the land?"

Söngsam had had to flee the previous June. At night he had broken the news privately to his father. But his father had said the same thing: Where could a farmer go, leaving all the chores behind? So Söngsam had left alone. Roaming about the strange streets and villages in the South, Söngsam had been haunted by thoughts of his old parents and the young children, who had been left

with all the chores. Fortunately, his family had been safe then, as it was now.

They had crossed over a hill. This time Söngsam walked with his face averted. The autumn sun was hot on his forehead. This was an ideal day for the harvest, he thought.

When they reached the foot of the hill, Söngsam gradually came to a halt. In the middle of a field he spied a group of cranes that resembled men in white, all bent over. This had been the demilitarized zone along the Thirty-eighth Parallel. The cranes were still living here, as before, though all the people were gone.

Once, when Söngsam and Tökchae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, without anybody else knowing, and caught a crane, a Tanjöng crane. They had tied the crane up, even binding its wings, and paid it daily visits, patting its neck and riding on its back. Then one day they overheard the neighbors whispering: someone had come from Seoul with a permit from the governor-general's office to catch cranes as some kind of specimens. Then and there the two boys had dashed off to the field. That they would be found out and punished had no longer mattered; all they cared about was the fate of their crane. Without a moment's delay, still out of breath from running, they untied the crane's feet and wings, but the bird could hardly walk. It must have been weak from having been bound.

The two held the crane up. Then, suddenly, they heard a gunshot. The crane fluttered its wings once or twice and then sank back to the ground.

The boys thought their crane had been shot. But the next moment, as another crane from a nearby bush fluttered its wings, the boys' crane stretched its long neck, gave out a whoop, and disappeared into the sky. For a long while the two boys could not tear their eyes away from the blue sky into which their crane had soared.

"Hey, why don't we stop here for a crane hunt?" Söngsam said suddenly.

Tökchae was dumbfounded.

"I'll make a trap with this rope; you flush a crane over here."

Söngsam had untied Tökchae's hands and was already crawling through the weeds.

Tökchae's face whitened. "You're sure to be shot anyway"—these words flashed through his mind. Any instant a bullet would come flying from Söngsam's direction, Tökchae thought.

Some paces away, Söngsam quickly turned toward him.

"Hey, how come you're standing there like a dummy? Go flush a crane!"

Only then did Tökchae understand. He began crawling through the weeds.

A pair of Tanjöng cranes soared high into the clear blue autumn sky, flapping their huge wings.

TRANSLATED BY PETER H. LEE