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Flowers of Fire

T W E N T I E T H - C E N T U R Y
K O R E A N S T O R I E S

Revised Edition

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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 Söngsam 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 Söngsam had met. Holding on to the trunk of the tree, Söngsam 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 Söngsam went up for a closer look. He was stunned: this young man was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tökchae.

Söngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch'önt'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, Söngsam learned.

Söngsam sat down on the dirt floor and lit a cigaret.

Tökchae was to be escorted to Ch'öngdan by one of the peace police.

After a time, Söngsam lit a new cigaret from the first and stood up.

"I'll take him with me."

Tökchae averted his face and refused to look at Söngsam. The two left the village.

Söngsam 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 Tökchae, too, must want a puff. He thought of the days when they had shared dried gourd leaves behind sheltering

Cranes

HWANG SUNWŎN

Hwang Sunwŏn was born on March 26, 1915, in Taedong, South P'yöngan, and was 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. "Cranes" was published in 1953, and his short story "Cain's Descendants" (1954) won him the Asian Freedom Literature Prize in 1955, and a novel, Trees Standing on the Mountain Slope (1960), the Korean Academy of Arts Prize in 1961. His collected works were published in 1964 and selected works in 1969, each in six volumes. A member of the Korean Academy of Arts since 1957, Hwang is currently a professor at Kyönghüi University in Seoul.

A master of the modern Korean short story form, Hwang has attempted to capture the images of his people in lyrical prose and delicate natural scenery. His evocation of the inner mood of characters by private images and symbols, and his subtle insight into their psychology, has often been praised. He has dealt with the people close to the soil, concentrating especially on children and older people—childhood for its innocent freedom, and old age for its spiritual loneliness. Drawing upon Korean myths and legends, his concern has been to perceive the Korean character with an intuitive faith. In his recent novels, Hwang has dealt with one's own and others' selves, and man's essential loneliness.

walls, hidden from the adults' view. But today, how could he offer a cigaret 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 cigaret 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'önt'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 becoming clear of 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 before 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 the 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 espied 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 the people were all gone.

Once, when Söngsam and Tökchae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, unbeknown to the adults, 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 up 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