

The Crane by Hwang Sun-wŏn

Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

This village to the north of the 38th parallel demarcation line was lying utterly still below the lofty, clear, autumn sky.

On the dirt-floored steps in unoccupied houses, a few pale gourds lay where they had rolled, propped one against another.

Old men he happened to cross turned aside, pipes first. The children left the path well ahead of him, as children do. Every face was riven with fear.

The entire neighborhood had suffered little or no damage in the recent turmoil. Yet somehow it seemed not to be the old village in which he had lived as a child.

Sŏngsam paused on the hillside with the chestnut trees. He scrambled up a tree. From somewhere far off he heard the old man with the wen yelling, "You kids, climbing people's chestnut trees again!"

Maybe that old man with the wen had died too? There had been no sign of him among the few elderly inhabitants he had encountered. Embracing the chestnut tree, Sŏngsam briefly gazed up at the blue autumn sky. On a branch that had not so much as stirred, a remaining chestnut burr gaped open of its own accord and the ripe chestnuts fell.

When he reached the house being used as a temporary office by the security forces, he found a youth tied up with a rope.

It was the first youth he had seen in the village; he went closer and examined his face. He was startled. Why, it was Tŏkchae, his best friend as a child.

He asked the member of the security team who had accompanied him from Ch'ŏnt'ae about him. He explained he had been vice-chairman of the peasant's league; they had just brought him in after catching him hiding in his own house. Sŏngsam sat perched above the dirt step in front of the house, smoking a cigarette as he questioned him.

It had been decided that Tŏkchae would be taken under guard to Ch'ŏngtan. They had decided that one young member of the security forces would take him.

Sŏngsam lit another cigarette from the completely burned down stub, then stood up.

"I'll take this fellow down myself."

Tŏkchae consistently kept his eyes averted and did not once so much as glance in Sŏngsam's direction.

They left the village.

Sŏngsam went on smoking one cigarette after another. He could not taste anything. He merely inhaled the smoke. Suddenly the thought struck him that this Tŏkchae

fellow must be longing for a cigarette too. The memory came of the two of them as children smoking cigarettes made from pumpkin leaves in a corner of the garden wall. But it would not do to offer this fellow a cigarette today, now, would it?

Once when they were children he and Tökchae had gone together to steal chestnuts from the old man with the wen. It was Söngsam's turn to climb the tree. Suddenly they heard the sound of the old man yelling. He slipped and fell from the tree. His bottom was pierced by chestnut burr needles. But he just ran. It was only when they were too far away for the old man to follow that tears began to flow. Tökchae had pulled out a handful of his own chestnuts and pushed them into Söngsam's pocket

Söngsam threw down the cigarette he had just lit. He decided he would not smoke another cigarette while he was taking this fellow Tökchae down.

They reached the uphill path. In the prewar days after Liberation, he and Tokchae had often visited this hill to cut fodder, before Söngsam had gone to live in Ch'önt'ae, to the south of the 38th parallel.

Filled with a sudden surge of unexpected rage, Söngsam shouted:

"Hey, fellow, how many people did you kill then?"

For the first time, Tökchae glanced briefly in his direction before lowering his head again.

"Hey, fellow, how many people have you killed?"

Once again Tökchae turned his head in his direction. The he stared at Söngsam. Little by little his eyes grew brighter, while his lips, surrounded by a full growth of beard, twitched.

"And you then, did you kill anyone?"

Hey, fellow! As he spoke, Söngsam felt his heart grow lighter. As if something had been stuck tight, then released.

Still.

"Why would someone who'd been vice-chairman of the peasants' league stay put and not run away? Were you hiding for some kind of mission?"

Tökchae said nothing.

"Speak truthfully. What mission were you hiding like that for?"

Tökchae simply keeps walking on in silence. It looks as though this fellow's brooding over something. At a time like this I need to get a look at his face. But he keeps his gaze averted and does not turn his head again.

As Söngsam takes hold of the pistol hanging at his waist:

"I'm not trying to excuse myself. I was made vice-chairman of the peasant's league because I was the son of the poorest peasant, and reckoned a hard worker; if that's

a crime deserving death, well, okay then. Now as before, I'm a guy who's good at nothing but farming.

Then after a short pause:

"Now father's lying sick at home. It's already been half a year."

Tökchae's father had been a poor farmer, a widower growing old with Tökchae for sole company.

Seven years ago his back was already bent and age-marks were erupting on his face.

"Didn't you get married?"

A moment's pause:

"I did."

"Who with?"

"With Mini."

What, with Mini? How funny. Mini, who knew nothing about anything, small in size, chubby. Very prim-looking. Provoked by that, Tökchae and he had all the time used to tease her till she cried. And Tökchae had married that Mini.

"So how many kids have you got?"

"The first one's due this autumn."

Söngsam suppressed with difficulty the laugh that had unexpectedly come welling up. The question how many kids they had came from his own lips, yet the news that the first was due this autumn was somehow unbearably comic. Even without that, Mini had been so small, her belly must be a whole armful now. Still, he sensed that this was not at all the moment to laugh or make a joke about it.

"Anyway, did you not realize what would happen if you stayed instead of running away?"

"I was intending to run away. They said that when the southerners moved north, they would kill every man without exception, and they obliged all the men between seventeen and forty to go north. I thought of running away, even carrying father on my back. Then father said no. He said no one ever heard of a farmer planting all his crops then running away somewhere, leaving everything behind. Beside, I'd been reckoning that I would be the one to close father's eyes at the end, after he'd grown old farming, always counting on my being there. Really, there was no way we could leave the fields we'd been working together and evacuate"

Back in June, it had been Söngsam's turn to evacuate. That night he had told his father secretly they should get out. Then his father had said just the same thing. How can a farmer leave his farming and go running off somewhere? Söngsam had left alone. As he went wandering among unfamiliar roads and villages, the thought of the

farm work he had left in the hands of his elderly parents and youthful bride never left him. Luckily, now as ever, his family was safe and sound.

They crossed the brow of the hill. Suddenly it was Sǒngsam who was walking with his face averted. The autumn sunshine was stinging his brow. He was thinking what good weather it was for harvesting.

Reaching the foot of the hill, Sǒngsam suddenly stopped.

What looked like people bending over, out in the middle of the plain, must surely be a flock of cranes. This had become part of the so-called 38th Parallel neutral zone, where people were not allowed to live, so in the meantime these cranes had taken full possession.

Once, when Sǒngsam and Tǒkchae had been about twelve, they had laid snares, unknown to the adults, and caught a crane. It had been a red-crowned crane. They tied the wings down with a straw cord, then almost every day the two would come out, clutch its neck, climb on its back, have an uproarious time. One such day they heard the villagers whispering. They were saying that someone had come up from Seoul to shoot a crane. Intent on taking a specimen, he had even come equipped with permission from the Japanese government-general. The two went hurrying along the same path to the plains. It was no longer a matter of being found out and scolded by the grown-ups; their only thought was that their crane must not be killed. Without pausing to catch their breath, they freed the crane's leg from the snare amidst the grass and undid the ropes round its wings. But the crane could hardly walk, probably because it had been held down by the snare all that time. The two took hold of the crane and hurled it into the air. At that very moment they heard gunfire. The crane flapped its wings a few times then fell back to earth. It must have been hit. But then another crane in a nearby thicket spread and flapped its wings, at which their crane, that had been crouching on the ground, stretched out its neck, gave one call, and went flying up into the air, circled above the two boys' heads then flew off into the distance. The boys could not tear their eyes from the blue sky where their crane had vanished

"Hey, let's go crane hunting!"

Sǒngsam spoke suddenly.

Tǒkchae looked puzzled, wondering what he was talking about.

"I'll use this to make a noose. You go and drive the cranes."

He untied the rope binding him and went striding off through the grass.

Tǒkchae's face paled abruptly. The thought flashed through his mind that a little while before the men had said he would be shot. In a moment a bullet might come speeding from the direction where Sǒngsam had gone striding off.

Far away, Sǒngsam suddenly looked back.

“Hey, why are you standing there like a dummy? Hurry up and send some cranes over.”

At that, as if suddenly understanding something, Tökchae went striding off through the grass.

Just then, a few red-crowned cranes were slowly flying with outstretched wings across the high, blue autumn sky.