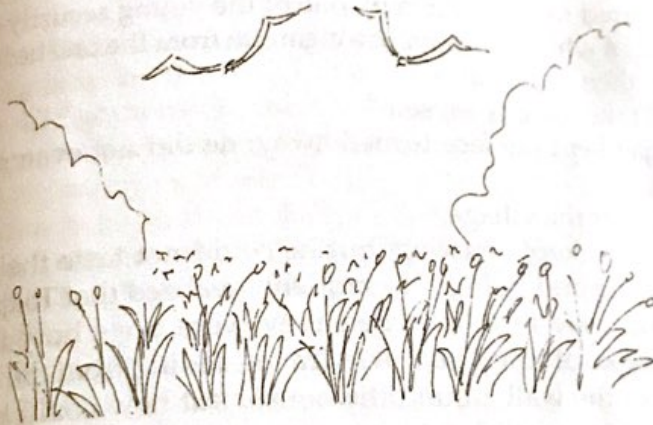


CRANES

HWANG SUNWON

Hwang Sunwon was born in northern Korea in 1915. The confusion of war and the love of literature are themes that entwine in Hwang Sunwon's life. When he was born, the Japanese occupied Korea, and his father was imprisoned as a resister. After World War II, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel into the Soviet-influenced North and the American-influenced South. With the coming of the Korean War, Hwang Sunwon left the North and moved to the South. During his youth and between open war, Hwang Sunwon was educated in Japanese and later attended the Waseda University in Tokyo, where he majored in English literature. He became an esteemed writer and a professor, and his writing reflects the isolation and disruption of war. His writings can be found in novels and short story collections.



The village just north of the thirty-eighth parallel was quiet beneath the clear, lofty autumn sky.

A white gourd lay where it had tumbled, leaning against another on the dirt-floored space between the rooms of an abandoned house.

An old man Songsam happened to meet put his long tobacco pipe behind his back. The children, as children would, had already fled from the street to keep their distance. Everyone's face was masked with fear.

Overall, the village showed few signs of the conflict that had just ended. Still, it did not seem to Songsam to be the same village where he had grown up.

He stopped walking at a grove of chestnut trees on the hill behind the village. He climbed one of the trees. In his mind, from far away, he could hear the shouts of the old man with a wen. Are you kids climbing my chestnut tree again?

the area around Ch'ont'ae, south of the thirty-eighth parallel, two years before the Liberation in 1945.

18 "You bastard, how many people have you killed?"
19 Tokjae glanced toward Songsam, then looked away again.

20 "How many people have you killed?"
21 Tokjae turned his face toward Songsam and glared. The light in his eyes grew fierce and his mouth, which was surrounded by a stubble beard, twitched.

22 "So, is that what you've been doing? Killing people?"
23 That bastard! Still, Songsam felt a clearing in the center of his chest, as if something caught there had been released. But then he said, "Why wouldn't someone like the vice-chairman of the Farmers' Alliance try to escape? You must have been hiding out because you had been given some assignment."

24 Tokjae did not respond.
25 "Well? Answer me. What kind of mission were you hiding out to do?"

26 Silent, Tokjae just kept walking. The guy certainly seemed cowed. At a time like this, it would be good to get a look at his face. But Tokjae did not turn toward Songsam again.

27 Songsam took hold of the pistol in his belt.
28 "It's no use trying to explain your way out of it. You'll have to be shot anyway, so go ahead and tell the truth."

29 Tokjae began to speak. "I'm not trying to get out of anything. First and last, I'm the son of a dirt farmer. I was made vice-chairman of the Farmers' Alliance because they said I was a hard worker. If that's a crime worthy of death, there is nothing I can do. The only skill I've got is tilling the ground." After a moment he continued.

30 "My father is sick in bed at home. It's been six months now."
31 Tokjae's father was a widower, a poor farmer who had grown old with only his son by his side. Seven years ago his back had already been bent, and his face had dark age spots.

32 "Are you married?"
33 "Yes," Tokjae answered after a moment.

34 "Who to?"
35 "To Shorty."

36 Not Shorty! Now that's interesting. Shorty, a fat little girl who knew the breadth of the earth but not the height of the sky. Always such a prig. Songsam and Tokjae had hated that about her. They were always teasing and laughing at her. So that's who Tokjae had married.

37 "And how many kids do you have?"
38 "Our first is due this fall."

39 Songsam tried to stifle a smile that rose to his lips in spite of himself. Asking how many children Tokjae had and having him

answer that the first was due in autumn was so funny he could not stand it. Shorty—holding up her armload of a belly on that little body. But Songsam realized that this was not the place to laugh or joke about such things.

39 "Anyway, don't you think it looks suspicious that you stayed behind and didn't flee?"

40 "I tried to go. They said if there was an invasion from the south, every last man who was a man would be captured and killed, so all the men between seventeen and forty were forced to head north. I really didn't have any choice. I thought I would carry my father on my back and go. But he wouldn't stand for it. He said if a farmer leaves the fields he has already tilled and planted, where can he go? My father has always depended on me alone. He's grown old farming all these years, and I have to be the one to close his eyes when the end comes. The truth is, people like us who just till the ground wouldn't be any better off even if we *did* flee..."

41 Songsam himself had fled the past June. One night he secretly spoke to his father about escaping, but his father had said the same thing as Tokjae's. How could a farmer flee and leave his work behind? Songsam fled alone. As he wandered along the strange roads through strange towns in the south, he never stopped thinking of the farm work he had left to his old parents and his wife and children. Fortunately, then as now, his family was healthy.

42 They crossed the ridge. Now, somehow, Songsam was the one who kept his eyes averted. The autumn sun was hot on his forehead. What a perfect day this would be for harvesting, he thought.

43 After they had gone down the far side of the ridge, Songsam hesitated.

44 It looked like a group of people wearing white clothes were stooped over working in the middle of the field. It was actually a flock of cranes, here in the so-called Demilitarized Zone at the thirty-eighth parallel. Even though people were no longer living here, the cranes remained as before.

45 Once when Songsam and Tokjae were about twelve years old, they had secretly set a snare and caught a crane. They even bound its wings with a straw rope. The two boys came out to the place they kept the crane almost every day; they would hold the crane around the neck and raise a ruckus trying to ride on its back. Then one day they heard the adults in the village talking in whispers. Some people had come from Seoul to hunt cranes. They had special permission from the Japanese governor-general to collect

specimens of some kind. When they heard this, the two boys raced off to the field. They were not worried about being caught by the adults and scolded. Now they had only one thought: their crane must not die. Without stopping to catch their breath, they scrambled through the weeds. They took the snare off the crane's leg and loosened the straw rope from its wings. But the crane could hardly walk, probably because it had been tied up for so long. The boys held the crane up between them and tossed it into the air. They heard a gunshot. The bird flapped its wings two, three, four times, but fell back to the ground. It was hit! But in the next instant, another crane in the grass nearby spread its wings. Their own crane, which had been lying on the ground, stretched out its long neck, gave a cry, and rose into the sky, too. They circled over the boys' heads, then flew off into the distance. The boys could not take their eyes off the spot in the blue sky where the cranes had disappeared.

"Let's go catch a crane." Songsam said abruptly.

46 Tokjae was bewildered. He did not know what was going on.

47 "I'll make a snare out of this, and you drive the cranes this
48 way." Songsam untied Tokjae's bonds and took the cord. Before Tokjae knew it, Songsam was crawling through the grass.

49 At once, Tokjae's face went white. The words "you'll have to be shot" flashed through his mind. At any moment a bullet would come from wherever Songsam had crawled.

50 Some distance away, Songsam rose and turned toward Tokjae. "What do you mean standing there like an idiot! Go drive some cranes this way!"

51 Only then did Tokjae realize what was happening. He started crawling through the weeds.

52 Above, two cranes were soaring, their vast wings spread against the high, blue autumn sky.