

Broken Strings

By Kang Kyung-ae

Translated by Sora Kim-Russell

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About Kang Kyung-ae

Kang Kyung-ae (1906 – 1944) was a leading writer, feminist, and labor activist during the colonial era. After publishing her short story “Broken Strings” in the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper in 1931, she migrated to Gando, a.k.a. Jiandao in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of northern China. As a result, much of her writing dealt with the local communist movement and anti-Japanese resistance fighters. By depicting the poverty experienced by ethnic Koreans living in Gando, Kang’s works exposed the dark side of colonialism while giving voice to the resistance.

Kang’s first work, “Broken Strings,” reveals the concerns and inclinations that would come to characterize her writing. The main character Hyeong-cheol stands at a crossroads: take the well-trodden path down which his future is guaranteed, or stand with the masses and fight society. After agonizing over this choice, he throws everything away and leaves for Manchuria. With its cast of characters who sacrifice their youth in Gando to devote themselves to the people’s struggle, this story demonstrates Kang’s sense of duty as a writer who wanted to change the world. The stories published after “Broken Strings”—“Salt,” “Mother and Child,” “Suffering,” and “Darkness”—were likewise set in Gando and reflect her revolutionary yearnings.

The most important feature of Kang’s work is her authentic, unembellished depictions of the era and the lives of the people: she neither whitewashes nor distorts. The tragic lives of the lowest rungs of society and the difficult lives of the impoverished are depicted vividly and realistically. *From Wonso Pond*, a novel that deals with conflicts between tenant farmers and pro-Japanese collaborators, conflicts between capitalists and workers, and the purposeful struggle of the laboring masses, captures the writer’s revolutionary ideology. Her other works, which include “Dismissal,” “The Underground Village,” and “Drugs,” all explore similar themes.

Broken Strings

The steamer Yeongdeokhwan was heading west along the Incheon-Nampo route, bellowing out black smoke, and leaving Girin-do Island of Ongjin County in its lonely wake. The red rays of the sun that reached down like a hand from the tangled clouds in the eastern sky were swallowed up by a dark, damp fog that was casting a white screen along the base of the distant mountains. But the blue sky still visible above the fog lightened the heart. Like the heart of a slave freed from his fetters... White sails and red sails aimlessly brushing the horizon were as lonely as the pine trees sagging on the cliffs and suffering in the breeze. The waves crashing and shattering against the rocks kept throwing themselves at the shore. Over... and over... and over... Like the human struggle for survival...

Hyeong-cheol, who was on his way home for summer vacation, leaned against the bow and cast his gaze far into the distance. The ship had passed Mahap-do Island and was turning towards Bultasan Mountain just visible past Gumipo Port. From inside the slumbering ship, passengers began to emerge one by one with toothbrushes in their mouths.

Several fatigued-looking crewmembers were still curled up fast asleep at the base of the smokestack with their hats covering their faces. Hyeong-cheol felt weighed down by a strange emotion and walked slowly across the deck and down the stairs to steerage. Hye-gyeong, who was accompanying him, had suffered greatly the previous night from seasickness but seemed to be feeling better, as she was lying with

her head propped against the trunk she had brought with her. He sat down next to her and tried to read from his book, but he couldn't focus. He couldn't help stealing glances at her. Her hair was tousled against her reddened cheeks, and the voluptuous curve that started from the base of her pretty ears and continued down past her slender waist held a charm powerful enough to shake a man's heart.

Just then, the *woo* of the steam whistle blowing overhead and reverberating all the way from the distant hills to his very core woke Hyeong-cheol from his reverie, and he remembered what he was supposed to do.

"We're already at Gumipo! Time for us to go," he said, his voice trembling as he barely managed to rouse her. He packed up her belongings along with his own and rose.

"What? We've already arrived?" Hye-gyeong said. While Hyeong-cheol carried their luggage up to the deck, she sat with her back to him and gazed into a mirror as she pulled back the strands of hair that clung to her cheeks with her pinky fingers and put her hair up.

The beach at Gumipo was one of the best in the Orient, so every summer hundreds of American missionaries went there to escape the heat. They had around two hundred houses that were built on a hill called Bongnae. From up there, the wide Yellow Sea lay in front, and in back was craggy Bultasan Mountain.

Hyeong-cheol and Hye-gyeong boarded a sampan from the liner, and as they came over the rough waves, they saw an American flag flying high above Bongnae, whipping and flapping in the breeze. [Omitted.]

'I am a pitiful son of Joseon, you are a wretched daughter of Joseon,' Hyeong-cheol thought as he stole another glance at Hye-gyeong, and his eyes hazed over with tears.

For Hyeong-cheol, who had come home for the summer, part of his daily task was to drink in as much of that clean air blowing over the surface of the sea as he could and to frolic in the water while soaking up the sun's ultraviolet rays to his heart's content. One day, he was resting his tired body with his legs splayed out in the sand. The Western-style houses with their red roofs and plastered walls, just barely visible between the gloomy trees that seemed to ooze drops of grease, stood far off in the distance, forming a straight line with the horizon and stretching off endlessly to the right. A seagull beat its wings... first one... and then another... A white sail disappeared behind an island. By now, Hyeong-cheol's spirit had left his body and joined with the cosmos, while he sat, unaware of where it had wandered off to.

Just then, he heard a voice calling out to him, "*Oppa!*" When he turned to look, there was Hye-gyeong, and wasn't that his little sister Eun-suk whose hand she was holding? With a look of surprise on his face, he rose and hurried over to them. Hye-gyeong smiled shyly and turned away. Her parasol concealed half of her body.

"*Oppa*, look at this flower!" Eun-suk said. Her dark eyes glimmered, and she held out her pretty little hand to him. A gentle breeze stirred her hair, and Hye-gyeong's skirt rippled. Hyeong-cheol took the flower and brought it to his nose before addressing Hye-gyeong.

"The weather is lovely today."

"Yes, it is! Eun-suk was getting bored so I brought her out to play."

Hye-gyeong blushed, as if she were making an excuse or had been pricked by her conscience.

"It's good you came. There's no wind and the waves aren't too rough, so it's a perfect day for sailing. I'll take you two out!"

He ran fearlessly toward the sea. All the while glancing back at them as if to say *follow me...*

In his bathing costume, Hyeong-cheol's arms and legs were as tanned as an African's, but his strong body and muscular chest looked trustworthy. The pearly white teeth that showed from between his dark lips whenever he smiled were those of a warrior on the front lines; he was every bit a man. Hye-gyeong smiled shyly at Eun-suk, took her hand, and trailed behind Hyeong-cheol, placing her feet delicately inside the footprints he had left in the sand.

Powered by Hyeong-cheol's strong arms, the boat rowed through the towering waves and out into the sea... further and further out... meandering aimlessly with its cargo of the happiness of sweet love. Every now and then, when the boat was rocked by a wave, their eyes met, and they smiled. This was both their crowning happiness and the joy of youth that can never be relived. But alas! We must not forget that we live in a place where even this pleasure could not be enjoyed freely. Every time the thought occurred to him, Hyeong-cheol's chest grew heavy, and he realized again the bitterness of love, the ache of love.

“Look at that bird!”

Sweet, innocent, young Eun-suk pointed to a bird diving below the water. Hyeong-cheol found her innocence charming and envied it. He and Hye-gyeong had not yet whispered their love to each other, but during their travels back and forth to Seoul to study, they had come to think fondly of each other. They were slowly becoming aware that with each passing day and night their fondness had grown into a burning hot ember. Already the sun had turned a dark crimson and was sinking below the western mountains. The tangled skein of clouds coiling over the hills were tinted pale pink, the sea was turning dark red, the islands were growing dark, and everything

around them was changing moment by moment, hour by hour, but the flames of their love continued to burn bright. The boat drifted past a shady pine grove and turned towards the head of a millet field. Smoke from a shack on the mountain slope slipped between the trees and crept up the folds of the mountain. As they drew closer, they could hear the plaintive weeding song of a farmer.

Why are you so lovely, why? Why are you? So lovely?

I might just slip on this ugly lone shoe and follow you, my beloved.

It was the peaceful song of men returning from a hard day's work in the fields. The grain they had planted grew nonchalantly skyward. It would be a rich harvest that year.

But the crops they had poured all their strength into would be stolen from them come autumn, and they wouldn't have so much as a spoonful of boiled millet to eat. They were little more than cattle raised on a ranch. Little more than sheep. Than pigs. They were alive so they could be used by the upper class. They lived to keep them in skins and milk and meat. How could they be any different from the cows and sheep and pigs that were fed grain and kept alive just so they could give the shepherd their labor and skins and milk and meat? Hyeong-cheol shared these thoughts with Hye-gyeong.

“And that is why I plan to stop attending college, Miss Hye-gyeong!”

“Why? Even if what you say is true, don't we have much more to learn?”

Hye-gyeong looked at him with sad eyes and demanded an explanation.

“Of course we have more to learn. But do you know how many of our fellow countrymen have finished college? And how many are as ignorant as the day they

were born? We know that we are too stupid to lead the masses with some theory created by a small minority with a hero complex.”

His voice was gradually getting more heated.

“What’s the point of Marx and Lenin? The time for fighting with their old theories has passed. The masses are clutching their empty bellies and suppressing their hunger. And we are bound to be one with them. More and more, I am coming to realize that I must stand and fight alongside them.”

While he was speaking, the boat had reached Songcheon. The chapel bell broke the darkening air with its plaintive ring. Hye-gyeong, who had been raised in the church, lowered her head and offered up a silent prayer. The light through the church windows grew ever clearer.

They went their separate ways to their homes.

Before they knew it, summer vacation was over, and Hyeong-cheol and Hye-gyeong returned to Seoul. Autumn was already taking its first step into Seoul, and the evenings were growing chilly. Hyeong-cheol was starting to struggle with a secret inner anguish. After school, he wandered the fields around Cheongnyangni. He stared blankly at a wild chrysanthemum swaying at his feet and then plucked it and stared at it some more only to angrily crush it in his hands and fling it away. Then he kept walking. His thoughts were no longer on Hye-gyeong but rather on his inability to command his own future. He stood at a crossroads with no idea of where to go. Human beings come into this world as a tiny speck of life amid the life of the vast, endless universe. Wasn’t his own life the life of a beggar, the life of an unfortunate? What was the point of his studying law? Let’s say he did pass the examination and became a so-called high-level civil servant. Would that bring him honor, or happiness?

No, he would feel shame. Or let's say he became a lawyer. A brave warrior of a lawyer who goes to the gallows for society, at that. What kind of power would such a lawyer have? Or let's say he tried to amass a fortune and become a millionaire. It would be impossible, and even if he managed to do it, would it make him feel any better? No, he would only feel sorry towards his impoverished countrymen.

So he would have to be courageous for society. His life would have to blossom into one of beauty and meaning. That's what it meant to live like a human being. But wait... Did he not lack the courage and the preparation to go through with it? He stood at a crossroads. Should he go to the right? Should he go to the left? The sun setting beyond the western mountains urged him along.

Hyeong-cheol could not help but struggle with this torment. His head was filled with questions.

That night, Hyeong-cheol turned off the light and lay down to sleep. The moonlight stole in through the window and crept over his pillow. He had spent the last few nights lying awake and wrestling with the thoughts that tormented him. That night, as well, he turned in early to try to clear his dizzy head. But as usual he could not fall asleep, and his nerves were as frayed and sharp as hemp. He gave up on trying to sleep and got out of bed. Outside, the leaves cast their shadows on the window and drifted to the ground in the gentle autumn breeze. Whenever he felt this way, Hyeong-cheol would draw his dear companion, his mandolin, closer to his side. His fingers found their places on the strings and began to strum. But it was not enough to quell the storm in his mind. He shoved the mandolin back into the corner and pulled the blanket up over his head. Then he slowly counted—*one, two, three, four*—all the way up to five thousand, but it was no use.

The next morning, Hyeong-cheol rose with a heavy head. When he looked in the mirror, his eyes were bloodshot and his face was very pale. He opened the door to return his breakfast tray and set out for school, but he saw a platoon of Japanese soldiers with bayonets fitted in their rifles marching past. What a sight! Such bravery! It was training day for the troops. Soldiers were coming and going every which way, from the barracks to the streets. He smiled at all of them, even the Japanese beggars rummaging through trashcans in the street. Yes! He, too, wanted to fit a bayonet into the tip of a rifle and become a soldier, to mix in with that crowd and march triumphantly down the street. But no. He would no doubt be met with ridicule for having the courage of a nobody. Wasn't his a pathetic life? People walking past Hyeong-cheol stared furtively at him. He stood awkwardly, tilting his head to the right and then to the left, and then nodded over and over, as if comprehending something, and resumed walking. He looked like a crazy person. [Omitted.]

One day Hyeong-cheol returned from school to find a letter sitting on his desk. He glanced at the address and saw that it was from home. He eagerly ripped the envelope open and was shocked at what he read.

Hyeong-cheol's family—which consisted of his parents, Eun-suk, and himself—had been wealthy farmers who lived comfortably on their own land. But his father had all but reduced himself to begging to ensure that his only son Hyeong-cheol received a full education. Every year, his mountain of debts had risen higher, until one day the winds of recession began to blow and the price of grain plummeted. Now he was unable to pay off his loans and had been brought before the law. Hyeong-cheol's temperamental father wrote that he no longer wished to live there and was taking the family to Ninguta in Manchuria, where they would rely on the help of some relatives, and insisted that Hyeong-cheol join them.

Had his father revealed any of their financial woes to him during that time, Hyeong-cheol wouldn't have been all that surprised, but his father hadn't given any signs for fear of interfering with his son's studies. Hyeong-cheol's eyes bore through the paper, but there was no mistaking the message. As Hyeong-cheol stood there feeling frantic with the letter clutched in his fist, his face turned to sorrow, as if he'd reached a resolution, and his eyes blazed with anger.

"This is good. It's good. Finally, I know what I must do. I should have known already... I have been weak and lacking the courage to choose my own path."

He clenched his fists over and over and threw the letter on the desk.

The wind rattled the window and cast flurries of snow against the mulberry paper. The only sound in the room was the ticking clock—*tick, tock...*

The electric lights that glowed in the wide plaza in front of Joseon Shingung, the Shinto temple near Namsan Mountain, heightened the soft winter mood. Snowflakes swirling in the beams of light looked like the mayflies that fly into the flames of oil lamps on summer nights and contend with death. Hyeong-cheol and Hye-gyeong walked past the temple, casting long shadows on the snow, and slowly came down the steps toward Namdaemun Gate. The modern buildings erected at angles beneath the rainbow of lights around Namsan Mountain were unmistakable symbols of a metropolis. The colossal form of Baekakgwan at the base of Bukaksan Mountain could be seen clearly in the dark. But the few, scattered flames of lamps and torches blinking in the vast darkness that surrounded the building only made the view look sadder. Hyeong-cheol and Hye-gyeong came to a stop.

“Thank you for coming all this way to meet me, Miss Hye-gyeong, and in this cold weather, too. I suppose you must hurry back soon, since you’re staying in the dormitory.”

“No, I don’t,” Hye-gyeong said shyly. She stood still with her head down. Hyeong-cheol studied her for a moment and then sighed.

“I have one favor to ask of you before I go. Please stay and protect our country to the bitter end. Please help defend it.”

For Hyeong-cheol, the great bustling city of Gyeongseong at the foot of Bukaksan Mountain looked like the blessing of Joseon. The two of them were silent for a moment. Around them was the rattle of streetcars and taxicabs. Hye-gyeong raised her head, as if she’d come to some decision, and gazed at Hyeong-cheol...

“I’m going with you,” she said.

“What?”

Hyeong-cheol couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His heart felt like it might boil over. Tears filled Hye-gyeong’s eyes and traced two lines down her lovely face. Her tears fell and fell. Hyeong-cheol took a step closer to her and boldly placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Oh! You are a woman, after all! All this time, I thought your feelings for me were only of friendship... But you feel the same way as I do...”

“Yes! I have longed to be your eternal companion, and your wife.”

“Is that so? I thought the flames of love burned only in my heart. But still, you mustn’t go with someone as unfortunate as me.”

His voice trembled.

“Since when have we ever been happy? And I am not the type to pursue happiness.”

Hye-gyeong's heart had grown bold, and her words were outspoken.

“But intellect cannot solve everything. Since I am in no position to take you as a wife, and you cannot pursue me, I will pray to the end that you study hard and become a wonderful mother someday, and a valiant worker. I will think of that as your favor to me.”

Each time they spoke, their breath was visible in the light. They continued walking past Namdaemun Gate, all the way to Gyeongseong Station. An express train from the south was gliding into the station.

Hyeong-cheol slid open the carriage window, which was sculpted with flowers of frost, and stuck out his head. Hye-gyeong stood on the platform. A heavy silence passed between them as they gazed at each other and exchanged the occasional deep sigh... Their sighs were a lamentation of their fate, of never again seeing one another. The train whistle screeched, and the wheels began to turn. Hyeong-cheol and Hye-gyeong held hands for a moment and then let go.

“Farewell.”

“Take care.”

The people revealed in the light pouring out of the train windows—people dozing off, people eating, people reading newspapers, people gazing outside—passed before Hye-gyeong's eyes, and warm air brushed over her nose. She ran along the platform beside the train until it left the station. Hyeong-cheol's face vanished into the darkness, and soon, not even the lamps on the caboose could be seen. All of the blood in Hye-gyeong's body rushed to her head, and her legs shook. She felt like she might collapse on the spot. When she was finally able to take firm steps and brought her hands to her face to collect herself, she realized her face was flushed and tears obscured her vision. The lights grew hazy, and the long crowd of people passing

before her looked like an enormous pool of liquid... Gyeongseong without Hyeong-cheol was meaningless to her. Her heart had danced with the hope of a sweet spring, but instead it had turned to a melancholy autumn aflutter with falling leaves.

The day came for Hyeong-cheol's family to leave for Manchuria. The heavy snow that fell the night before had turned the world white. The snow blooming on the branches drifted down. The sun, which had risen high in the eastern sky, reflected off of the snow and sparkled brightly, pricking the eyes of onlookers. A pair of crows that had been searching for food in the hills flew toward the mountain in front of their house. The overland route from Songcheon to Sugyo Station was 130 *li*. From there, they could take a train, but they had to first travel by oxcart. Since it was shameful to leave during the day, when others could see, they prepared everything so they could depart that night. They had two oxcars: one that they loaded with their household goods, and the other that they had topped with a bamboo canopy for the human passengers. Hyeong-cheol's chest smarted as he stared at the carts parked in the front courtyard. He pictured Hye-gyeong's face. He would also have to bid farewell today to the beautiful country he saw before him and his beloved native land. He strummed his mandolin and gazed at the dark red rays of sun sinking below the western mountains. Black smoke curled up from the chimney of a hut buried in white snow.

Hyeong-cheol's family boarded the oxcars. The cart loaded with their belongings went ahead, leaving twin wheel tracks in the snow as it put the village of Songcheon behind them, wheels squeaking as they rolled forward, forward, the snow like smoke as the wind blew through the branches of the trees that lined the road. The world was dark. The only light to be seen was the red glow from the windows of scattered houses. And the frozen stars glittering in the black sky.... One of the stars

dragged its long tail against the sky and vanished. The distant barking of a dog sounded even sadder.

Hyeong-cheol lay in the cart with his eyes closed, lost in complicated thoughts that he could not express. His father puffed away on a cigarette. His mother and Eun-suk sat quietly. ...Their bodies swayed left and right in time with the clitter-clatter of the cartwheels, which alone broke the silence.

By the time the cartwheels, which turned and turned without rest, reached the town of Jangyeon, the roosters were crowing. The houses lined up to the right and left of the wide street were dead asleep, and there was not a soul to be seen out of doors. Hyeong-cheol's heart ached at the thought that, in this wide world, there was nowhere his family would be welcome. They passed through the village and began to ascend another quiet mountain slope, the cowbell tinkling.

Hyeong-cheol had taken out his mandolin and was strumming it absentmindedly. ...Then he turned to Eun-suk.

“Sing something, Eun-suk! Something cheerful. I don't want to hear a sad song... Let's hear a happy tune!”

Young, innocent, blameless Eun-suk opened her pretty mouth and began to sing. Hyeong-cheol's fingers moved over the strings.

Big brother! Mother is crying.

She strokes my hair and cries.

*She says the money she raked together until her thumbs bled
was stolen by a man strutting around in a western suit.*

Big brother! Mother is crying.

She strokes my hair and cries.

*She says the food she grew while eating bean paste on boiled millet
was stolen by an old man with a long beard.*

Eun-suk was still mid-song when Hyeong-cheol suddenly hurled the mandolin away from him. It smashed into pieces. Startled, Eun-suk clung to her mother's side, her eyes round with confusion. Hyeong-cheol clenched his fists and shouted.

“Why am I so attached to this that I should carry it with me everywhere I go? This is not the time for my fingers to dance on the strings. All that's left to me is to take action.”

The cold air of dawn seeped into their bodies. The eastern sky was ablaze.

Epilogue: Hyeong-cheol was executed by firing squad in XX last summer, and Hye-gyeong is currently serving a prison sentence for XX.

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