

Low Pressure Front

By Cho Myung-hee

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Literature Translation Institute of Korea

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About Cho Myung-hee

Cho Myung-hee (1894 – 1938), pen name Poseok, was born in 1894 in Jincheon, North Chungcheong Province, as the son of a poor scholar. He graduated from Jungang High School in Seoul and studied philosophy at Toyo University in Japan. In 1919 he was arrested and jailed for participating in the March 1st Movement. He made his literary debut in 1925 with the publication of “Into the Ground” in *Gaebyeok* magazine, and published his most well-known short story “The Nakdong River” (1927) in *Joseonjigwang* magazine.

A representative writer of the Japanese colonial period who followed the communist ideologies of KAPF (Korean Federation of Proletarian Art), Cho went into exile in 1928 in the Maritime Province of Siberia in the Soviet Union in order to escape a Japanese crackdown. In 1934, he served as an executive of the Far East chapter of the Soviet Union of Writers and also published his epic poem, “Goryeo Trampled.” He was arrested by the Soviet military police in 1937 and deported to Tashkent in Uzbekistan. In 1938, he was reportedly executed by firing squad at a Khabarovsk prison. His publications include a collection of poems, *On a Spring Lawn*, and a collection of stories, *Into the Ground*.

In “Low Pressure Front,” Cho Myung-hee explores a common trope of colonial-era Korean literature: the frustrated intellectual struggling to make a living in the face of limited opportunities. Trapped between the constant crisis mode and the inescapable boredom of poverty, the speaker in this story reflects Cho’s socialist leanings and his interest in the downtrodden, but the acerbic voice and intimate point of view lend an unexpected touch of humor to an otherwise familiar narrative.

Low Pressure Front

The battle to make a living. The battle to find and keep a job. I've been fighting these battles for years.

But even in the thick of battle, the ennui that trickles out of this worthless living, this idle livelihood drips and dribbles. I conquer one hill only to find ennui waiting at the bottom. Another hill—more ennui.

Sometimes, as I'm being dragged mindlessly like a cow or a horse by the tether called *making a living*, I suddenly snap to, as if woken from a deep sleep, angry eyes opening wide. I look back at my own lackadaisical self and get the urge to rant:

“You call that ‘making a living’? If you really want a life worth living, then face the reality that makes it worthless. Plunge in, penetrate, go in kicking and screaming. I can't stand this pathetic excuse for a life, dragging itself along the ground like the tail of a whipped dog. If you must let the bastards grind you down, then at least have some fun while you're at it. Aim high or aim low, but don't just dangle there, limp and flaccid, like bull testicles on a hot summer day!”

They used to say it takes ten years of hard work just to become the guy who looks after the royal tomb, the lowest rank there was in the old days. That saying held true for me when I struggled to snag this gig as a newspaper reporter. When I finally got the job, I thought, ‘Now I can stop worrying about making ends meet.’ But here I am, led forward by the struggle to make a living while ennui brings up the rear.

Just past eleven, I plunk my heavy feet down on the stone steps that lead to the newspaper office. Another morning, another loathsome commute.

On feeble legs, I plod my way up to the second floor, nudge open the door to the editing room, and slip inside.

‘Look at this! It's like an old junkshop in here. All these workers sitting around like items no one wants to buy. It was the same yesterday, the same today, the same the day before yesterday, the same tomorrow, always the same nauseating sight... And now the worst of the lot has joined them!’

I go to my desk, settle my butt into my seat, and look around.

Across the room, one of the accountants catches my eye. He always does. He's short and stocky; his eyes, nose, and mouth are all crowded together. If he were a gentleman of Joseon, he'd be the type from some backwater country village who struts around with his hands behind his back, tut-tutting at everyone. If he were a Westerner, he'd be a short Mexican in a sombrero. If an animal, a hedgehog. If an object, a field hockey ball. Can you imagine how frustrating that would be to spend your life as a field hockey ball, rolling around and around, punted from goal to goal?

Over on the right, the junior chief of the Politics desk—the very word *chief* fills me with loathing—is a snappy dresser but chubby, dull-eyed, and thick in the lips and cheeks. A real pig of a man. But for a pig, he’s pig royalty. He’s dumped his dirty bath water. He’s a pig viscount. A pig baron, maybe. Imagine how fantastic that would be, to live your life as a pig!

And who else...

The door squeaks open and a member of the sales department comes in. He’s tall, lanky, broad-shouldered. Has a swarthy complexion. With his bouncy gait, he looks like he’s always skipping around and clapping, ‘Ti-ra-ta-ta! Ti-ra-ta-ta!’ For all I know, he might actually skip and clap sometimes. Or more likely, he’s always skipping on the inside. Damn puppet on a tray, doing tricks on command. I can’t imagine spending all my time on earth skipping around and clapping, ‘Ti-ra-ta-ta! Ti-ra-ta-ta!’ Pathetic.

And who else? Just look at these jerks skulking around in this shoebox of an office!

‘What’s wrong with all of you? You’re nothing but the rotted heads of bean sprouts chucked in the sewer!’

Was this whole era, this whole society, one giant sewer...? And this newspaper office in particular...?

But even those rotten sprouts were capable of admirable things on rare occasions. When that happened they were no longer rotten sprouts but rather magnificent creatures—or, dare I say it, human beings.

Should the time ever come, a time that calls upon us to ‘March on, brothers, towards freedom and equality!’ under the command of ‘Give us freedom and happiness, or give us death!’ then I’d think, ‘Ah, the blood of glory boils in these men too! The sky will open before them!’

Or, should they sing, ‘When the sun shines upon the dawning spring, let us gather freely, let us gather for a spring party, let us dance a spring dance!’

I’d say, ‘Comrades! Take my hand, and I will take yours!’

But instead, I overflow with ennui. I bubble and froth with it, like rice fermenting into wine. My blood simmers. I reek. How did I get this way?

There is no livelihood here. The economy that is the fundamental condition of making a living has been ruined for one and all. Other livelihoods have been destroyed as well.

The intellectuals of this land—the so-called children of wisdom, cleverness, and refinement who traveled to foreign lands to study and then returned home—have no way out. They have no courage or strength to do the things they must do. It is difficult for anyone to act freely. And yet their stomachs growl. They tie bandanas around their heads to show their determination and force their way into places like this newspaper office. But the office is every bit as slack as their own households. Wages are late more often than not. The struggle to make a living continues unabated. Limbs and hearts alike hang limp. Living displays with blank eyes sit slumped in their seats.

Today as well everyone grumbles about whether or not we'll get paid. It's been three or four months since we last got a taste of our salaries.

One reporter who's tight with the managers sidles up to me.

"They say no paychecks today either!"

I'd been half dozing off, half deep in thought with no particular desire to work. But when he told me this, I snapped back to my senses. I unconsciously scanned his face and then dropped my head. Disappointment came and pressed gently on my heart. My family passed before my eyes. As a matter of fact, an unpleasant scene had played itself out at home that very morning.

Early that morning, a commotion arose outside the gate of the courtyard house that I've been renting. This is what happened: Another family's belongings were being moved unannounced into our clearly already overcrowded rooms.

"What's this shit doing here?" I said. "You can't move into a full house! No! I won't let you!"

I stood in the gate to block them from bringing in more of their belongings.

"The landlady told us to move in. What right do you have to raise your voice at us? You're just a tenant."

"Raise my voice? It doesn't matter whether I'm just a tenant or not. As long as I live here, I won't stand for this!"

"We'll see about that," the new tenant said and ran off.

After a while, our old witch of a landlady came, huffing with anger, and started screaming at me.

"You're four months behind in rent, and you have the nerve to block the new tenants? You should be ashamed of yourself! You're a thief!"

"Listen, lady. Even if you take stock of what's going on and speak to me calmly, I'm still going to get my way. You think you can get what you want by yelling?"

"What? Get *your* way? If that's not the attitude of a thief, then I don't know what is!"

Her last words came out long and shrill, like the tail end of a steam whistle, as she shrieked and moved to hit me.

I wanted to kick her over and over until she was dead. But the idiot in me swallowed his anger beneath his mask of a so-called refined and cultured man, and said, "Listen, you do what you want, and I'll do what I want." With that, I shut the gate, went back to my room, and lay down.

I heard the gate burst open again. My wife, who'd been standing next to the gate, was still arguing with the landlady. The words *bitch* and *you bitch* reached my ears.

I lay there and didn't move. The new tenants' belongings came in. The hall and the other room were now stacked to the ceiling. My sick mother, who'd been resting in the other room, got pushed out. She came over to my room. My wife came running in too and started taking her anger out on me.

“You call yourself a man? What a pretty penny you make that you should have to put your woman through such poverty and top it off with this humiliation!”

I was already feeling shitty about the situation, but when I heard that, I got mad.

“Damn it, you ruinous bitch! You may not know me, but you should know your place. You dumb cow! You think I like living this way?”

She tried to scold me again. I couldn't take it and started kicking her.

She fell with a thump.

“So instead of starving me to death, you mean to trample me to death instead!”

My wife's brainless ramblings. Our three kids' nonstop whining. My mother's worried grumbling. It was all too much.

I got up and left.

‘Damn it,’ I thought. ‘Does no one in all of Joseon understand the burden we men face? Maybe that cow over yonder does?’

‘Or is this just a prelude to another bout of ennui?’

In a nutshell, I'd initially thought of this bitter, awful poverty as an excellent experience, as if I were gaining something spiritually. Each time the fist of suffering swung towards me, I regarded it as sacred and tried to meet it with a reverent heart. But having taken blow after blow, I was left with nothing but an exhausted body and mind. I couldn't keep going like this. Not within this exhausting ennui...

That evening, I step out onto the wide thoroughfare of Taepyeongtong. I have 30 *won* in my pocket, my first wages in three months. My three months of back wages, at 45 *won* a month, should have come to 135 *won*. Even that much wouldn't be enough to feed a bedbug, but here I am with only 30 *won*. My dark thoughts show no sign of stopping. A moment ago, when I'd accepted the bills, I wanted to rip them up and throw them in my boss's face.

“A single *won* in an empty fist is still a fortune,” he'd said. “Why don't you start with this and use it to put out some of your more urgent fires?”

I picture my family at home like a pack of hungry dogs pressing their snouts together as they await their master.

‘Let's go!’ I tell myself. ‘Let's go home!’

‘I'll find a new room to rent, move our things, buy some food, some firewood...’

‘And then what? Endure more of this worthless life that repeats itself over and over, day in and day out?’

Once, I'd stood off to the side and gazed at my family as they sat around eating, and thought, ‘Evil! Each and every one of them! They're all hungry ghosts bent on tearing me apart and devouring my flesh and spirit!’ The hatred I felt then returns full force.

‘Ah, I can't stand the sight of them anymore! This awful, repetitive life makes me want to vomit!’

I gaze at the violet of the setting sun for a moment. At the Hwangtomaru intersection, I turn in the direction of Jongno Boulevard.

‘Damn it... I’ll just spend it all first.’

My mother’s sighs, my wife’s tears, my children’s fretting—this thirty *won* burning a hole in my pocket.

‘I’ll wring their tears from them and survive on that instead. Now, let’s see how strong my heart is...’

The next morning, as I walk briskly up the path in front of Yeongchumun Gate, I realize that my breath still reeks of alcohol. When I get to the alley that leads to our house, I muffle my steps and perk up my ears. I stop just outside the gate and listen. There’s no sound.

‘Are they all dead? If they’re not dead, maybe they’re bedridden with starvation?’

I slip inside. Not only are they not bedridden, they’re sitting around chatting away and appear perfectly healthy. Only my wife looks me over with suspicion. I’m sure she’s wondering where I spent the night.

I rummage around in my pocket and find a little money left. I run back outside and buy a couple of pounds of beef and one measure of rice, along with some treats for the kids. Then I return home.

“What’s this? So little rice and so much meat?”

My wife’s face beams with joy. She probably thinks I’ve come into a lot of money. Even my kids, who would normally be whining at this point, bounce around the room with newfound energy.

Slurp! Gulp! My, how well they eat. They must love the taste of that beef soup. I look at them and smile. I’m not sure I’ve ever had a smile as mixed as this before—one part happy, one part sad, one part who knows.

A melancholy mood hits me suddenly and I step back outside with my heart in my throat.

The day is so overcast. The heat is stifling. The people walking down the street are damp with sweat.

‘Argh! I can’t breath!’

Why won’t it hurry up and rain? Over this street, over these people? Or better still, the clouds clear away...