

Hunger and Slaughter

By Choi Seo-hae

Translated by Janet Hong

Literature Translation Institute of Korea

Originally published in Korean as *Giawa saryuk* in Chosun Mundan, 1925

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About Choi Seo-hae

Choi Seo-hae (1901-1932) is one of the major writers of early proletarian literature from the 1920s. Designated as the first of the Anti-Conventional School, Choi's works heralded the arrival of a new kind of Literature of Poverty in the history of Korean literature.

Born in Seongjin in North Hamgyeong Province in 1901, Choi grew up in extreme poverty. He wandered the Gando area from an early age, leading a rock-bottom existence, but despite a lack of formal education, he had a burning desire to pursue literature. He was able to debut as a writer when "Homeland" was published in *Chosun Mundan* in 1924 on the recommendation of the writer and activist Yi Kwang-su.

His representative works, such as "Escape," "Hunger and Slaughter," "The Death of Bakdol," "Seizing the Big Water," "The Tyrant," and "Bloody Flames," take as their subjects struggling destitute characters who reject the established order and pursue survival through murder and arson. Although his vivid descriptions about poverty that have been borne of his personal experience are striking, the abrupt leaps in exposition tend to undermine the overall artistic composition.

Choi's debut story, "Homeland," which depicts the hardships and frustration of one Korean man during the colonial era, is unlike the rest of his works, for the story is devoid of "anti-conventional" aspects. Although the motivations of the main character Unsim and the cause of his discontent remain unclear, the story still introduces the basic elements that characterize the rest of his fiction.

Both "Consumption" and "Hunger and Slaughter" are clearly more in line with the rest of Choi's work in terms of style and treatment. "Consumption," with which Choi also debuted in 1924 when it was published in the *Donga Ilbo*, depicts the sufferings and pressures of a destitute man who cannot provide for his elderly mother, ailing wife, and young daughter. Their troubles increase as the story progresses, with the story ending in bleak despair when the protagonist's mother is mortally wounded. In "Hunger and Slaughter," which was published the following year and is essentially the same story as "Consumption," we see Choi's attempt at expanding and reworking many of the same themes and concerns. Names and the perspective have changed, and the thoughts of the main character, Kyeongsu, have been expanded to better illustrate his inner torment. However, the most significant and drastic change is the ending. Instead of simply fading out in passive despair, "Hunger and Slaughter" ends in tragic violence.

Established in 1925, the Korean Federation of Proletarian Art (Korea Artista Proletaria Federatio; KAPF) praised Choi Seo-hae's works for serving the ideological purposes of the Party. However, it is difficult to say that Choi's Literature of Poverty adhered exactly to Party principles, in the fact that his work had been shaped mainly by his own experience. This is also the reason why Choi's work could not fuse with KAPF's

ideology in the end and came under attack. After this period, Choi turned his attention on portraying the everyday joys and sorrows of the petit bourgeoisie, but his work was not met with a positive response and he ended up dying at an early age in 1932.

Hunger and Slaughter

Kyeongsu hoisted the bound load of firewood onto his back.

Regardless of whether the load was too heavy, even if he were to topple over along the way, he would have cut down more wood if the weather hadn't been so harsh, but he could no longer bear the agony of an empty stomach or a frozen body.

Barely managing to carry the load that was taller than he was, Kyeongsu groaned under its weight and crept along the steep mountain path. The ropes dug so sharply into his shoulders that his chest felt as though it were going to collapse, and his legs shook so violently that the slightest movement threatened to pitch him flat on his back or headfirst to the ground. He, who was afflicted by his burden, also suffered emotional torment, for it seemed the owner of the mountain would grab him by his neck at any moment and say, "You scoundrel! Why are you stealing my wood?" Several times, he was tempted to dump the load, but whenever he pictured his family shivering in the cold, he gritted his teeth and gathered his strength again.

The frigid northwestwardly wind pierced Kyeongsu's chest like spears. The sky was murky and darkness was all around.

When he finally arrived at his home nearly five *li* away, Kyeongsu's chest was soaked with perspiration. Every time he moved, the pungent smell of sweat traveled from his clothes to his nose. He flopped down outside the kitchen door with the load still on his back.

Now that he was finally home, all the tension in his body lifted and his nerves went so slack that he could hardly move a finger.

"Heh heh, Daddy's home! Daddy! Heh heh."

It was Hakshil who had turned three that year. She peered out at her father through the torn paper window and tapped at the door. When Kyeongsu, overwhelmed with exhaustion until then, saw his daughter's smiling eyes like wild grapes peering out at him through the window and heard that sweet voice of hers, an emotion so clear, so pure, so gentle, and so warm—an emotion that was difficult to describe—flooded his heart. He wanted to burst through the door and crush her in his arms and kiss her baby lips.

"Is that you, Hakshil?" He smiled and removed the rope and sickle from his belt.

Right then, the kitchen door jerked open. "Oh, you're home. You must be freezing! You must be hungry, too. What shall we do?" his old mother said anxiously.

"Mother, you worry too much! I'm fine."

Seeing that wrinkled face of hers, which had faithfully recorded years of suffering, Kyeongsu's heart twisted inside his chest.

Kyeongsu stepped into the kitchen.

Whenever Kyeongsu looked around the dim interior at the walls that were frosted over and the dust rising from the cold floor, he imagined a secret basement cell that appeared in western novels.

Holding Hakshil, who called, “Daddy! Daddy!” as she tottered over to cling to his knees, he sat by the door and gazed at the kitchen hearth. Kyeongsu’s wife, who had been moaning for over ten days after her post-partum illness had returned, now lay quietly by the hearth, wrapped in clothes and a soiled blanket. Her shut eyes were sunken and her cheekbones protruded sharply out of a haggard face that had already been thin to begin with.

“She didn’t get worse while I was gone?”

“Not worse, but she’s not looking well.” His mother, who had been gazing vacantly out the window, turned her head and looked weakly at her daughter-in-law.

The bitter wind blew in through the window. The floor, after not having been heated for several days, was bone-chillingly cold.

Hakshil, who didn’t own a single patched-up skirt and was forced to spend the entire winter bottomless, lips blue from the cold, smiled and climbed on top of Kyeongsu’s knees and then onto his back and then back into his arms and onto his lap again, chattering in childish babble the entire time.

“The people from the main house came again and gave quite a scolding...” his mother trailed off, as though she couldn’t bear to continue.

“Those arrogant bastards. Do they think we’ll cheat on the rent? And so what if we did?” Kyeongsu snapped.

“Shh—they might hear you. Who can blame them? You think they should refuse to take what they’re owed? We’re in the wrong here...”

Even his mother’s words seemed to condemn their wretched plight.

“We’re in the wrong? Are we choosing not to give them the rent when we have it? If only we didn’t have to look at those lazy bastards!” Kyeongsu blurted in anger, but his mind was racing with a thousand thoughts.

Back in his mother’s time, they had been comfortable. Whenever he thought of how he, as the head of the household, was forcing his old mother, wife, and child to starve in a bitterly cold room, the twenty-or-so years he had lived so far seemed to have been completely worthless, and he felt too ashamed to show his face to his family.

(School? So I might have gone to middle school, but what did I ever do? We even sold our shack so that I could finish school, but what good did it do? All I did was create grief for my family!)

Several times a day, he regretted and cursed his life. And still, he would shake his head and think: No, no, maybe I’m wrong. Is there a rule that only the wealthy can get an education? Whose fault was it for selling the house and borrowing from people so that I

could study? Is it my fault? Am I to blame? Ah, the world would say I'm to blame. But who knew you'd go hungry even after getting an education—that you'd be worse off? Was that my fault, too? Why don't I work then? Work? What work? If I go to the country to farm, do I have a field? If I go to the city, do I have any money? If I become a teacher or office clerk, I would get in trouble the moment I spoke my mind... Then should I just die? But why should I die? Why should I die when there's nothing wrong with me? I should fight to live, or at least die fighting! Why should I just lie down and die? Does the world have nothing to eat, nothing to wear? There is so much to eat, so much to wear! It's just that a few bastards have it all! Those arrogant bastards worry because they have too much and then there are people dying because they don't have enough. Am I supposed to watch and do nothing?

Whenever Kyeongsu's thoughts went down this road, his blood started to boil. He wanted to scream and run out and smash everything in sight. But when he considered his insignificance and imagined the plight that his family—those who depended on him—would be in once he was gone, his will to “just grin and bear it” suppressed his rage.

His heart throbbed whenever he saw those in dire need, but at the same time, he saw another sight that was even more horrific—a horde of frightful shadows trampling that miserable lot.

(Ah, why do I even bother to curse them? Let's forget everything. Mother, wife, and child—they're not the only ones suffering. Is my family the only one to be pitied? There are people in this world who are a hundred times worse off. There's no use looking after my own, I should dedicate my life to helping everyone!)

He would become enraged and make up his mind time and again, but he lacked the courage to carry out his plan. No, it wasn't that he lacked courage; his attachment to his family was too great.

Kyeongsu, infuriated even now by the ghastly scene, sat with his arms around his knees, twirling his thumbs and looking intently at his wife in silence.

Hakshil continued to pester him. His daughter, whom he had thought adorable a moment ago, he now found irritating. He said to her, “I'm going to take a nap. Go to Grandma.” He pointed to his mother who was building a fire in the kitchen hearth.

He lay down. But in the end, he cursed his entire family and wished they would all die. If they died, it would be a great relief, as though he had shed an enormous burden.

(But no, they're people, too! If I cherish my own life, they would cherish theirs, too. Why should I wish them dead? So that I can bury them in this forsaken land, when I was the one who dragged them here to North Manchuria? Should I put them in their graves and go on alone? Ah, let's just pretend that really did happen. Their blood would spring up from every step I take, they'll curse me with their blood, so what could go right for me after that? That's right! Why did I even wish them dead? Let's live! Even if we get crushed to oblivion, we go on together! If we die, we die together!)

His eyes flashed open as though he had seen a terrible sight. He shut his eyes once more and faced the other way.

After turning away, Kyeongsu remained motionless and fell into deep thought again.

“Darling,” whispered his wife, who had been quiet until now. Her voice was barely audible, as though she had just managed to form the words.

“What’s the matter now?” Kyeongsu said angrily as he jumped to his feet with a scowl on his face. But he wasn’t annoyed at his wife for calling him. It was because he was unable to ward off the ineffable emotions that were warring in his heart.

His wife gazed at him and then slowly shut her eyes without a sound. From her closed eyes flowed thick tears, running down her haggard cheeks and falling on the straw mat. His heart sank. He regretted having snapped at his wife for no reason. Why couldn’t he at least speak tenderly to her—she who had followed him thousands of *li* to a foreign land, only to go hungry and naked and now lie sick—when he couldn’t even obtain the proper medicine for her? He felt anguish every time this thought crossed his mind. If she were to get up at that moment and strike his neck with an axe, he would not resist. He wanted to embrace her and repay her a hundredfold for his wrong.

“Are you okay?” Kyeongsu asked tenderly as he went to her side.

“It looks like she’s having another attack!” his mother cried in panic when she took a look at her daughter-in-law’s face. She had been putting Hakshil to sleep in the room after making the fire.

Sweat beaded like grains of millet on the forehead of his wife, who was clenching her teeth. Her withered lips gave off a bluish sheen.

Sweat also ran down the bridge of her nose. She began to pant. The old woman, who had sat through many nights tending to her daughter-in-law and could guess what was coming, lifted up the thin sheet and gazed at the twisting limbs. All ten fingers and toes of Kyeongsu’s wife were curled up and her arms and legs appeared so shrunken that it seemed as though she had been stuffed inside a wooden pail.

Kyeongsu and his mother massaged the limbs like before, trying their utmost to straighten them, but the limbs continued to twist and harden into lumps of iron. Kyeongsu’s wife appeared to be in utter agony.

“What’s happening?” Kyeongsu asked his wife, as he wiped her drenched forehead.

She moved her lips as though to say something, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth and she could not speak. Only her bloodshot eyes flashed open to look at Kyeongsu and closed again. His heart sank and his head spun.

“What—you can’t even talk now? Look at how she’s sweating!” His mother trembled and continued to massage his wife’s limbs.

His wife’s breathing grew even more labored and the perspiration soaked through her outer clothes, causing steam to rise up with every movement of the sheet.

“So this is how you die! What can we do? We’re sending you to your death without even a taste of hot soup. Kyeongsu, go get the doctor! Go and beg him to come. He’ll come this time if he has a heart. Go! We need to give her at least one treatment before she dies!”

Kyeongsu leapt to his feet. His eyes glittered with conviction as though he had finally made up his mind.

Doctor Choi, who had refused to come four times in the past, agreed to follow Kyeongsu that day.

After taking the wife’s pulse, the doctor said he could help her, but that Kyeongsu first had to sign a contract stating that he would pay a treatment fee of fifty *won*.

For a long time, the mother and son remained silent.

Kyeongsu trembled. He wanted to beat and kill the doctor. But if he wanted to save his wife, to whom every minute was crucial, he had to comply. But what on earth could he do? If he wanted to save her, he needed to come up with fifty *won*, but did he even have fifty *won*, let alone five *jeon*? If he couldn’t pay, his wife would die.

(Ah, so is this how my wife goes to her death?)

It felt as though someone were wrenching his guts.

“It’s fine if you don’t have the money right now,” said the doctor who had already assessed the situation. “We can postpone the payment until later. You just need to sign a contract ...”

Kyeongsu got an ink stone and drew up the contract. It went: “—will provide the treatment fee of a total of fifty *won* within one month’s time, but if there is a breach of condition, Kyeongsu will become a servant at the house of Doctor Choi for a year—”

The doctor inserted needles into Kyeongsu’s wife’s arms and legs and wrote up a prescription, saying, “Take this to Administrator Park’s pharmacy. There’s no ginseng at my pharmacy, so I won’t be able to make it.” Then he left without a backward glance.

His wife’s limbs loosened and gradually relaxed.

Kyeongsu could barely work up the courage to leave. When he finally arrived at the door of the pharmacy, he hesitated for a long time before entering.

The smell of herbs and medicine stung his nose. After much hesitation, he managed to open his mouth. “Please could you make this for me?”

The pharmacist picked up the prescription without a word and clacked the beads on his abacus. Looking at Kyeongsu, he asked, “Well, did you bring the money?”

Kyeongsu’s face burned. “I’ll bring the money tomorrow, please won’t you make this for me?” His voice was like that of a convict, requesting a prison guard for a visit.

The owner frowned without bothering to reply and disappeared into the room in the back. All of Kyeongsu’s sorrows surged up and tears darkened his sight. But there was also a kind of rage. The world was a cruel, cruel place. That truth felt infinitely more tragic and bitter than ever before. Even the medicine bags hanging in the room seemed to

mock him and chase him out. He rubbed his silent tears away with his fists and left the pharmacy. Kyeongsu felt relief as though he had escaped from prison, but when he thought about going back home empty-handed, the shame made him even more miserable.

Kyeongsu returned home.

The dusk had turned everything inside the house dim. He went and sat beside his wife.

“How do you feel? Where is Mother?”

“She went out after you left ... she still hasn’t come back. Did you get the medicine?” his wife asked softly.

Kyeongsu didn’t know what to say. As a husband, he could not bring himself to say that he had failed to bring the medicine that she desperately needed, especially when she was trying so hard to overcome the excruciating illness and be well once again.

“They’re making it now. I just came to see how you were doing. I have to go out again to get it,” Kyeongsu said, in an effort to make her feel better.

However, he felt more pained by the fact that he had lied. Why didn’t I just tell the truth? It upset him that he had fooled his simple, trusting wife. She depended on that medicine. She depended on it with all her heart, so that she could be rid of her suffering. Even though he felt guilty, he could not bear to confess that he had lied.

“The chemist didn’t say anything about you not having any money?”

“Hmph!”

Kyeongsu felt as though he were suffocating. And why had he answered that way? He sat rubbing his fingers without saying anything. He felt uneasy that his mother still hadn’t returned. He stared vacantly into the fire. The fire twitched and looked like some mysterious thing, and then the outline faded like a burning ball of fire. The light grew muddled. Dark clouds covered his body and he felt as though he were plunging into an endless, bottomless land.

His dark, sunken eyes started twitching and the two black pupils swimming in the yellowish whites began to cross. His face turned blue and his cheeks and lips began to convulse.

Opening his crossed eyes, he stared at the hearth. He saw new demons. These demons flashed their fiery eyes that glittered with greed. They stabbed Kyeongsu’s wife in the heart with an iron pipe and sucked her dark blood. Her face turned black and she started to writhe and moan. Every time she cried out in pain, the two demons clapped their hands, stuck out their tongues that were stained with blood, and shrieked with laughter.

Kyeongsu clenched his fists and screamed. His bones felt like they were being crushed to powder and his heart throbbed with pain. He looked to see if anything was beside him. Flaming eyes and dark reddish hands clung to his arms and legs. They, too, sucked the blood from his heart with an iron pipe while they howled with laughter.

A hairy demon with a red face picked up Hakshil and started to gnaw at her. With a cry, Kyeongsu jumped to his feet. It had been a nightmare. As though he had just discovered a terrible truth, he looked around the dim room. The room appeared exactly the same.

His mother still hadn't returned. For some reason, he felt uneasy. He had the thought that she had drowned herself in someone's well because of her suffering, or that she had hung herself on some tree. Whenever these thoughts crossed his mind, he saw his mother's hapless corpse. He went to the outhouse and even walked past his neighbor's well. His mother was nowhere to be found. No, no, she would never do such a thing! Each time he quashed his morbid thoughts, he was disgusted and ashamed with himself for having conjured up those images in the first place.

Full of worry, Kyeongsu sat down beside his sleeping wife.

Hakshil was fast asleep. Now that the painfully cold floor was warm, everyone seemed to have succumbed to sleep. Kyeongsu, too, felt exhausted and drowsy.

"Kyeongsu? You in there?"

Kyeongsu woke with a start at the sound of his name. His heart seemed to be foretelling some impending doom.

He stepped outside. People were whispering in the cold darkness. Without cause, his heart sank and started to race. He looked around. A man carrying something on his back appeared before Kyeongsu.

"Mother!" Kyeongsu yelled when he realized who it was. He clung to the limp body of his unconscious mother.

They set her down in the room. Blood flowed from her arms and legs and soaked her rag-like skirt. Chunks of flesh hung off her torn face. She was limp and unconscious. Her body was cold and only her heart was still beating.

Kyeongsu was so stunned that he could neither cry nor speak.

"What happened?" asked someone in the crowd.

Kim Chambong, who had merely been clicking his tongue since he sat down, started to speak.

"Well, I was on my way back from Mulnam with Administrator Choe when we came up to the Chinese family's house across the stream. As we got closer, we heard their dog barking like mad! We knew how ferocious that dog is, so we were looking for a big rock when we heard mixed in with all that barking this voice as small as a mosquito, crying, 'Help! Help!' Choe and I ran up to see what was going on and saw the dog attacking someone! So we yelled and called the owner. When we finally chased off the dog, it turned out to be this old woman!" With this, Kim Chambong pointed at Kyeongsu's mother.

"That cursed dog bit and killed a person last year..." someone said.

"So what did the owner do? Did he just stand there and do nothing?"

“That damned Chinese. He cares more for his dog than his own father. Somebody beat the dog for being such a menace and *they* got punished!”

“We’re the ones who should be pitied for having to live on their land!”

Kim Chambong, who had stopped when he was interrupted, opened his mouth again. “By the time we sat her up, she had already passed out. But she never let go of that thing once,” he said as he pointed at a small bundle on the floor.

“What is it?” someone said, opening it.

Yellow millet, not even two quarts, spilled from the bundle. Kyeongsu’s mother had wanted to feed her sick daughter-in-law and so, she had taken out her hairpiece and gone to Mulnam to sell it for some food.

Hakshil, who had been sleeping until now, crawled over to her grandmother and tried to shake her awake.

“Grandma, get up! Up, up!”

She tried to lift her grandmother’s head, just as she always did to wake her.

Kyeongsu’s wife was weeping. The shock from the frightening spectacle set off another attack and she started to convulse. When her grandmother didn’t get up or answer, young Hakshil went to her mother and clung to her breast to nurse. The old woman’s breathing grew rapid.

The crowd began to disperse one by one. Not one person even brought a drink of warm water for his mother.

Kyeongsu’s head spun. His limbs began to spasm. It felt like a lump of lead was crushing his heart, like thick smoke was suffocating him, or like his insides were being pierced by a thousand needles—it was beyond description. All of a sudden, the sky turned black and the ground seemed to sink beneath him. From every dark corner, terrifying demons jumped out and spewed flames as though to set the whole world ablaze. The flames engulfed his house and leapt to consume his mother, his wife, Hakshil, and even himself.

Demons wielding sharp knives appeared suddenly in the crimson fire and stabbed his whole family. The sounds of their awful groans as they bled and bit their tongues and collapsed seared into his bones. He wanted to stop their suffering. Like scenes from the cinema, the images passed before his eyes as he leapt to his feet, shouting, “Just kill them! Kill them all!”

He grabbed a kitchen knife. Screaming, he raised his knife and plunged it down. His wife, Hakshil, his mother—he plunged his knife into whatever he saw. The three souls shuddered and convulsed and the whole room became full of blood.

“Kill everyone! Put an end to this world! Put an end to this hell! Everyone, die!”

He ran outside, shouting. His screams and the howling wind rang pitifully in the dark. He turned down a lonely lane. The shutters of the few shops along the street were drawn halfway.

Kyeongsu knew no hesitation. Lurching swiftly up the way, he smashed everything in his path. If he saw a shop, he bashed it, and if he saw a person, he stabbed them.

“A thief!”

“Look at that crazy bastard!”

The quiet street suddenly clamored with people’s voices.

“What, you think I’m crazy? You think I’m a thief? I’ll show you, you demons! I’ll kill you all!”

In no time, Kyeongsu found himself at the Chinese police station some distance away. He stabbed the policeman on watch in front of the station and ran inside. He smashed the windows. He stabbed anyone who came into view.

“Bang ... bang ... bang, bang!”

Gunshots rang out in front of the station. The shots echoed in the bleak wind like deadbolts. Then everything stopped and became covered with a terrible silence.