

City of Machines*

CHO SE-HŪI

Translated by
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July and August that year were unusually humid. Reports of the worst heat in 30 years often covered the newspapers. It seemed like the whole country would dry up and burn to a crisp. But Yun-ho, for one, had no cause for concern. The air conditioner his father had them install didn't make a sound as it pumped out cold air. If one day he heard that the city looming hugely in his mind suddenly didn't exist, he would have simply studied for the exam in his pleasant setting. The city of Ūn'gang remained as a dark picture inside Yun-ho's mind. The dead dwarf's children were working there. For Yun-ho, Ūn'gang was no more than just part of the surface of a small planet. As the means of a life eked out in one part of the dark surface, the dead dwarf's children sweated in a workshop with machines. They got the work easily. It wasn't that they had superior skills. Even the machines there couldn't do work without the help of people. The dwarf's children had already undergone many trials. Since they led

lives of the lowest standard within a group that was similar, their appearances didn't catch one's eye. Even the dead dwarf had used metal tools.

In his last years, he carried around in the sack on his shoulder, a cutter, monkey spanner, socket wrench, screw driver, hammer, water faucet, pump parts, T-joint, U-joint, screws, and file. In the dwarf's neighborhood, there had arisen a very strange smell.

Yun-ho had gone to the dwarf's house, leaping some five times to avoid stepping on the people who were lying drunk at his feet. The dwarf's wife peeled and added potatoes to the polished barley she had washed and put on to boil. The major issue for Yun-ho was getting into college. Preparing to re-take the exams, he had not until then given a single thought to injustice. Even "poverty" he had understood only as Current Vocabulary (it means "*pin'gon*"). "Poverty," "population" and "pollution" come up together and, so that he wouldn't forget, he memorized them

*First published as "Kigye toshi" in *Taehak shinmun* (June 20, 1977) and later incorporated into Cho Se-hŭi's collection, *Nanjangi-ga ssoaollin chagŭn kong* [Small Ball Launched by a Dwarf] (Seoul: Munhak-kwa Chisŏng-sa, 1978).

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as the Three P's. In school, academy, or study groups—these are what were taught. In the classroom they destroyed the kids. The dwarf had sat out on the flat by the embankment caring for his tools. Yun-ho saw his death as the end of a generation. Even while he was sleeping with girls he had thought of the dwarf's death. The girls hated that.

"Please," one girl said.

"Please don't talk about the dwarf."

"Why?"

"He makes me think of a bug."

"Not bug, human being!"

"Still, same thing."

The girl was stretched out naked.

"It's you who's the bug," Yun-ho had said.

Ŭn-hŭi was different. She sat wordlessly for a while. She was a very pretty girl.

"Strange," said Ŭn-hŭi.

"There's no way to express my thought."

"What thought is that?"

"I don't get it. People grabbed his share, didn't they?"

Ŭn-hŭi spoke carefully. Ŭn-hŭi had been the most pure and fair kid in the group studying to repeat the entrance exam a second year.

She got into college when Yun-ho started life as a third-year crammer. Her first impression of college was not particularly good. Ŭn-hŭi would come visit Yun-ho, sit wordlessly, and then go. One thing that college gave Ŭn-hŭi these last few months was freedom. It was a strange freedom from her parents' interference from the moment she left home to make it to classes. The driver let Ŭn-hŭi off in an alley two hundred meters ahead, from where the main college gate was visible, and went back. When the kids saw Ŭn-hŭi they thought first of Ŭn-hŭi's father. According to Yun-ho's moral standards, Ŭn-hŭi's father was not a man who rated respect. In front of Ŭn-hŭi, the kids didn't talk easily, even about the weather. The kids were on their guard with Ŭn-hŭi and felt victimized. Being a lawyer, Ŭn-hŭi's father's role was bigger than Yun-ho's father's role. So, the kids had it right. The lawyers would have meetings some place no one knows about.

When Yun-ho talked about the dwarf's children, Ŭn-hŭi only listened intently.

Yun-ho had an influence on Ŭn-hŭi. Even Ŭn-hŭi thought about Ŭn'gang, chocablock with black machines.

"It's because of you," said Ŭn-hŭi.

"It's because you're holding me."

"Wrong," said Yun-ho.

"I haven't forced you to do anything."

"Nothing forced. You've just *wanted*"

"I wanted? Wanted what?"

"Me."

But, so it was for Ŭn-hŭi, too.

"It did what to you?" asked Yun-ho.

"Nothing," Ŭn-hŭi said.

"Somehow I can't do it with other kids."

"Not me."

"So you'd said. That's why I cried. I hated it when it wasn't you."

That, Yun-ho knew too. But, knowing that, he still had gone to the small hotel and slept with other kids.

A worn red carpet was laid in the hotel on the alley that was dark for lack of exterior lighting. After sleeping with a girl, Yun-ho was always depressed. He was depressed deep in his heart. It seemed such a limitlessly stupid act to him that it negated his very existence. He thought himself as stupid as the objects in front of his eyes. Yun-ho should have been a little more quick about giving his love to Ŭn-hŭi.

In summer that year, Yun-ho made up his mind to love Ŭn-hŭi. Only Ŭn-hŭi understood Yun-ho. Ŭn-hŭi thought that Yun-ho might well become a labor movement activist or social movement activist. Ŭn-hŭi did not at all see Yun-ho simply as a third-year crammer. So, like Yun-ho, she let Ŭn'gang, where the dwarf's children worked, loom hugely. When Yun-ho thought of Ŭn'gang, he felt himself shriveling instinctively.

Ŭn'gang is huge and, inside, complex. When the people of Ŭn'gang talk about their city, one of the things you cannot quickly understand is their use of the word *stifling*. Situated in a peninsular region on the West Sea not far from Seoul, Ŭn'gang is ocean on three sides.

The first thing the people who live there come to discover when the tide rises is the blue of the ocean's surface. As that ocean's surface gets higher and then lower twice each day, it feels as if the whole of Ŭn'gang is moving according to the gravitational pull of a body beyond the earth. The area of Ŭn'gang is 196 square kilometers and the population is 810,000. When compared with the principal cities of our country, its area is rather large and the population is appropriate. All the same, one wonders whether the use of the word *stifling* by Ŭn'gang people isn't because the interior of their disposition or life is overlaid with deep doubt that outsiders cannot see. It is an outlook that has no connection with social control. There is not even one person in that place who would voice a complaint about the restriction of individual activity for the maintenance of order. If one were a real social scientist, he could probably do a proper description of the reality, structure, character, and change of the society. But, characteristic of our times, there aren't many people who carry out their responsibilities as given. In some ways Ŭn'gang is a forsaken city.

In that place there are an office of education, city hall, police station, tax office, court house, public prosecutor's office, port authority office, customs house, cultural institute, prison, church, factories, and labor union. It is easy to know what the laborers do in the factories but one cannot understand so readily what the people do in the agencies and organizations or in the assembly hall. Ŭn'gang people see Seoul people filling the wharf in order to go out to the islands. Seoul people go to the islands to catch the clams and crabs that they lack. Ŭn'gang people think how very foolish they are. The Seoul people try not to see the oil floating on the water. At that time, the wind blows from the ocean toward the mainland. In Ŭn'gang there can be nothing more important than the wind. Ŭn'gang people learned that belatedly.

In school children learn the history of Ŭn'gang, which developed as an international

trading port with the opening of treaty ports in 1884 and then into an industrial city. The Ŭn'gang Industrial District prospers with industries like metals, ceramics, chemicals, oils and fats, ship building, lumber, plate glass, fibers, electronics, automobiles, and steel; and for plate glass, in particular, it is given in the textbook as the leader in Korea. And furthermore, though the difference between high and low tide reaches nine meters, they have eliminated any difficulty by building a tidal basin.

The many hills create high and low areas in the city; and the urban district is divided into north and south by hills that stretch from east to west across the middle. The industrial zone is in the north. Black smoke rises from the countless soaring stacks and machines turn inside the factories. Laborers work in there. The dead dwarf's children are also working in there. In the air of that place are mixed toxic gases, smoke, and dust. All the factories vomit forth a dark to yellowish brown river of waste water and oil that is proportionate to their volume of production. The factory waste emitted upstream becomes the water used by another factory; then, vomited out again, it flows down to where it enters the ocean. The inner harbor of Ŭn'gang is stagnated into a rotten sea. Living things around the factories are slowly dying.

Flowers bloom even in Ŭn'gang, of course, but spring in that place is a season when the cold and dry, northwest seasonal wind changes over to a southeast seasonal wind that is hot and full of moisture. The southeast seasonal wind comes driving summer heat from a high pressure area over the ocean.

Typhoons that blow in from summer until early fall pass through Ŭn'gang and then go inland. What brings the winter with it is the cold and dry, northwest seasonal wind.

When it is winter, snow falls even in Ŭn'gang, of course, but the factory workers cannot see the snow collecting as it falls. No matter how cold it is, the river never freezes over and the snow falls and collects only in the residential district.

The wind in Ŭn'gang during the day blows

from the ocean toward the land and, at night, from the land toward the ocean. That wind drove the toxic gases and smoke of the industrial zone only toward the ocean and the mainland. But one night in May, the people of Ŭn'gang were aware of the fact that the wind had suddenly changed direction. The wind did not blow toward the ocean, nor did it blow toward the mainland, but paused in the sky above the industrial zone, and then blew directly toward the residential district. That wind slipped over the hills of the city that cause its high and low areas and settled well into the residential district. The little children who had been just about to fall asleep were the very first to be aware of the fact that the wind had changed direction. Grown-ups noticed that the children were suddenly having trouble breathing.

Even the grown-ups, who had taken their children in their arms and run to the hospital, could not breathe normally because of the stench. Their eyes smarted and their throats burnt. People, unable to stand it, dashed into the streets. A fog settled into the city streets and residential district and the street lights were not visible. Mass confusion arose and, in a moment, order collapsed. Thieves and hoodlums, grabbing an opportunity they hadn't thought of even in their dreams, ran amuck. The citizenry abandoned the residential district and fled toward the national highway connecting to Seoul. From nine until midnight, though no more than three hours, the people of Ŭn'gang trembled as they discovered themselves exposed, defenseless, in the face of great terror. In three short hours, the people of Ŭn'gang experienced every kind of anxiety. Although nobody could say for sure, they discovered that they were living in hazardous biological conditions without precedent in the history of Ŭn'gang. The next day, they thought that they would try to solve the problem. But, soon running into a huge wall, they ended up backing off dispiritedly. The people running Ŭn'gang were in Seoul.

The people of Ŭn'gang believed that, if necessary, it would probably be possible to

hold a mass meeting or create some show of force. They belatedly discovered that such things were not possible and then opened their mouths.

Yun-ho thought every day of the fact that his father was doing dangerous things.

Numerous factories and managers who run those factories—and the people who could run those managers were in Seoul. They used only physical power to turn the machines in the factories, and, with part of that power, they measured and announced the degree of Ŭn'gang's environmental pollution. The people of Ŭn'gang check the direction of the wind before going to sleep. The wind sweeps away toward the land or the sea the gas and smoke of the industrial zone where the dwarf's children work. The people of Ŭn'gang let it go at that. They do not think about the workers of that industrial zone that pours some hundred thousand tons of waste water into the ocean in a day. As long as a wind that has paused over the industrial zone does not blow toward the residential district again, they probably will not wake from their deep sleep. They have no need of knowing that the Ŭn'gang Central Regional Branch of the Office of Labor is made up of four labor inspectors. Those four labor inspectors have jurisdiction over some one thousand places of business. One person is not assigned to 250 workers but, rather, is overseeing 250 places of business.

The dwarf's children work there and live there. By the time the dwarf's oldest son had first arrived at Ŭn'gang, he thought their lives could get no worse. He had told Yun-ho that he sat through the first night at Ŭn'gang in the office of the workers' church. There he saw research data collected from factory employees by people of the worker's church.

Motivation for employment:

Poverty	58.1%
Family discord	15.1%
Wish for city life	12.4%
Friend encouraged	11.7%
Other	2.1%

Most desired workplace condition:

Gives a lot of pay	8.4%
Treats humanely	71.6%
Can learn a skill	19.1%
Other	0.9%

Degree of job-related fatigue

Always feel fatigue	59.8%
Sometimes feel fatigue	33.8%
Not particularly felt	5.7%
Never feel fatigue	0.7%

Do you think labor leaders are tools of management?

Almost all of them	39.1%
Some of them	28.3%
None of them	19.2%
I don't know	13.4%

Do you think that all Koreans can live well if we work hard, live frugally, and save our money?

That is true	41.3%
Somewhat true	21.5%
Difficult to achieve	33.5%
Totally impossible	3.8%

The dwarf's oldest son confirmed some of the percentages several times over: poverty (58.1%), treats humanely (71.6%), always feel fatigue (59.8%), almost all of them (39.1%), difficult to achieve (33.5%), totally impossible (3.8%). The dwarf's oldest son thought of the sense discouragement, antagonism, and alienation of those few who had answered "totally impossible."

"By then I already realized I couldn't just work," the dwarf's oldest son had later said.

"Why?" Yun-ho asked.

"It can't be questioned. The day I had gone to work for Ŭngang Motors, seven assemblers were kicked out."

"What do you mean by kicked out? They were dismissed, you mean? Did they do something wrong?"

"No."

"There was no union! Isn't that it?"

"No, they've got one."

"But is that kind of unjust dismissal possible? What are the union leaders doing?"

"They work for the employers."

"What kind of labor union is that?"

"That's the union."

"Looks like more unhappiness for him," Ŭn-hŭi said.

"Do you think of yourself as a happy kid?" asked Yun-ho.

"He, too, needs to have something to believe in."

"Right!"

Ŭn-hŭi exclaimed. That summer there was only one thing that Ŭn-hŭi wanted. Yun-ho knew that. Yun-ho also knew what it was that the Dwarf's oldest son wanted. But there wasn't a single thing that Yun-ho could do for the dwarf's children. The machines that turned within the factories were precise but the society there was quite full of strange habits, inspections, inefficiencies, and dangers. To the dwarf's oldest son, everything came to look only black, like the steam engines one can see in pictures or such.

The first task that the dwarf's younger son did when he went into Ŭngang Electric was loading and hauling castings in a metal handcart. For three months he worked as a trainee. When he started his training tasks, the union steward handed him a sheet of paper.

"He didn't join up," Yun-ho said.

"He, too, is a person who cannot be happy."

"He started reading books to find out what demands to make of the employers. And he told other workers whom he trusted to quit the union."

"What was he up to?"

"His dream was a new union."

"Where does your younger sister work?"

"Ŭngang Textile."

"Is Yŏng-hŭi well?"

When Yun-ho asked after his younger sister, the dwarf's oldest son had shaken his head.

"She's out of work," he answered.

"A notice of dismissal came from the company."

"What reason?"

"They say she wouldn't obey her supervisor. But don't worry. The kids in the union do their work well."

Yun-ho then, for the first time, saw the dwarf's oldest son laugh. Yun-ho was unable to talk with him for a long time. He was busy. What he had belatedly learned was that some several dozen people who never appear in public view substantially control the economic lives of Korean citizens. They operate big factories and load their goods onto the 60,000-ton-class freighters that dock at the inner harbor of Ŭn'gang city.

"That's unacceptable," the dwarf's oldest son had said later.

"There is nothing we can do."

"Who are *we*?"

"Me, my younger brother and sister, and the people who work at Ŭn'gang."

"Don't you suddenly want something that's too big?" Yun-ho asked.

"You don't understand."

The dwarf's oldest son had spoken without even turning to look.

The American-made air conditioner his father had them install really didn't make a sound as it pumped out cold air. July and August that year were unusually hot. The machines of the Ŭn'gang industrial zone continued to turn even that summer. Yun-ho knew too little. The dwarf's oldest son cried countless times after starting to work at Ŭn'gang. He receives countless threats, faced violence, had been hospitalized, and had even lived through detention. He face grew unrecognizably gaunt. Just two eyes appeared unusually big. His ideals tormented him.

"My dream is a simple one," he said, weakly.

"I know," said Yun-ho.

When he had quietly fixed his eyes on Yun-ho, he spoke.

"I couldn't get one proper plenary meeting of the union or conference of delegates. It's all one-way. Nothing follows the law. I only lost all the time. I've even lost face with my co-workers. All I've given them is pain."

"They probably understand you."

"And you?"

"I understand."

"If you say you understand me, then you've got to help."

"How?"

The dwarf's oldest son placed his hand on Yun-ho's back.

"Take me with you to your house. I'll stay just in your room. When I see my opportunity, I'll move out."

"What in the world are you up to?"

"I've got to meet him."

"Him? Who?"

"The head of the Ŭn'gang Group. I know he's your next door neighbor."

"What are you going to say when you meet him?"

The dwarf's oldest son dropped his hand from Yun-ho's back.

"I've nothing to say," he said.

"I'm going to kill him, that's what."

"You're crazy!" Yun-ho shouted.

"Nothing can be solved by setting out to kill someone. You've lost your reason."

"Good," he said in a low voice.

"I don't need anyone's help. It's something I'll do on my own."

"You are killing yourself. Who on earth do you want to die for?"

"I'm not dying for anybody."

"Then?"

"Let's drop it."

"If you're going to meet him, then go to Brazil," said Yun-ho, managing to suppress his anger.

"He took his seventeen-year-old daughter with him there on vacation. Try going to Santos and yelling his name."

"I'll have to wait until he comes back," said the dwarf's oldest son.

"I've got to kill him," he said, and turned his back.

There was nothing Yun-ho could do to help the dwarf's oldest son. Ŭn-hŭi was the only person that Yun-ho could help. Ŭn-hŭi wanted Yun-ho. Ŭn-hŭi would come visit Yun-ho, sit wordlessly, and then go back. Yun-ho took Ŭn-hŭi to the hotel on the alley that was dark for lack of exterior lighting. In the hotel was laid a worn red carpet.

Yun-ho placed his forefinger against Ŭn-hŭi's lips. Ŭn-hŭi spread open her two hands, placed them against her eyes, and looked at

Yun-ho between her fingers. When he embraced Ŭn-hŭi, Ŭn-hŭi's one-piece dress crushed upon itself and made a rustling sound. Naked, Ŭn-hŭi wrapped her two hands around Yun-ho's face and placed it against her breast. As Yun-ho put strength into his arms, Ŭn-hŭi sucked her breath in deeply. But it was of

no use. At that moment, Yun-ho came up against some moral core. *This must end now*, he muttered to himself. Inside Yun-ho's mind, as he was embracing Ŭn-hŭi, loomed the city of Ŭn'gang, full of black machines.

Let get organized. He can't do it all alone, thought Yun-ho as he left the hotel that day.

About the Author

Cho Se-hŭi was born in Kap'yŏng, Kyŏnggido Province, in 1942 and was educated at Sŏrabŏl College of the Arts and Kyung Hee University in Seoul. Cho made his debut as a writer in 1965 with his *Kyŏnghyang shinmun* award-winning short story, "Burial Boat with No Mast." After exactly ten years' silence, he re-emerged in literary circles with a series of stories that led to his best-selling 1978 collection, *Small Ball Launched by a Dwarf*. His lean, staccato prose and unexpected juxtapositions in context create a shock style that distinguishes him from his more conventional predecessors. This translation attempts to be as faithful to that style as English will allow.

Commentary by the Translator
