

‘What was it — to live well?’ Soon-il pondered. ‘I wanted my children to live well. To grow up without experiencing terrible things, to become adults unscathed. For everyone...to be happy. I wished for that, though I didn’t really know what it meant. I dreamt of it...without really knowing what it was.’<sup>1</sup>

*Soonja*. Not only is it the most common given name among Korean women born around the year of liberation, the name also embodies a familiar figure in Korean society: one whom we have all encountered, by whose blind devotion and expectations we have been overwhelmed, and whom younger generations have all too often subjected to criticism and dismissal for exactly those tendencies. Author Hwang Jung-eun sets out to tell the story of one such Soonja among thousands. Yet, Hwang does more than merely observe; she delicately weaves together the memories, wounds, and dreams that have shaped these individuals, to convey the story of Soonja as she experienced life in all its complexities.

One of the most striking features of Hwang’s writing is her narrative style, wherein readers frequently experience perspectival shifts between different narrators. Are Soonja’s memories real or imagined? Readers must grapple with this question whenever Soonja’s story seamlessly transitions from third-person narration to her own discontinuous speech and thoughts. With my translation, I have endeavoured to faithfully convey the fragmented yet fluid nature of this language, while also occasionally marking the dialogue and clarifying the speaker so as to prevent readers’ confusion. At the end of the translation, I have also appended the Author’s Note, where Hwang herself explains her reasons for this style of writing.

This sample translation was originally prepared for the 2024 Korean Literature Translation Workshop, hosted by the British Centre for Literary Translation, and includes both the original Korean text and my English translation. It is drawn from Hwang Jung-eun’s larger collection *Yeon-nyeon-se-se* (*Every Year, Every Age*), published by Changbi in 2020, with the ensuing text being an excerpt from her short story, ‘A Name Unknown’.

Yoonjeong Rhee  
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<sup>1</sup> Hwang, *Yeon-nyeon-se-se* (Paju: Changbi, 2020), p. 138. Translation my own.

너는 어머니와 아버지 중 누구를 닮았느냐고 순자가 물었을 때 이순일은 그 순간을 생각했다. 그 밤, 그 밤의 낙하, 좁은 등을 폭신하게 받아낸 눈더미와 겨드랑이를 누르던 손가락. 얼굴은 기억나지 않았다. 그 두 사람은 이순일의 인생에서 너무 이른 시기에 사라졌다. 아버지는 인민군 지하에서 마을위원회 위원장을 맡았다가 전선이 뒤집히는 바람에 실종되었다. 자수하면 산다는 조언을 듣고 국군 쪽으로 자수하러 갔다가 돌아오지 않았다. 이순일은 그가 어디서 어떻게 죽었는지, 혹은 어쩌다 영영 돌아오지 못하게 되었는지 아는 바가 없었지만 어머니의 죽음에 관해서는 들은 이야기가 있다. 마을에 전염병이 돌았다. 네 엄마는 병에 걸려 물을 길으러 가지도 못하는 이웃의 부탁을 거절하지 못하고 환자가 있는 집에 물동이를 이고 들어갔다가 병을 얻었다.

북에서 군인들이 내려오기 전이었다. 이순일은 그즈음 아이들만 모인 방에서 며칠 먹고 잔 기억이 있었다. 하루는 백부가 찾아와 엄마를 보러 가자고 마당

Asked by Soonja if she resembled her mother or her father more, Soon-il thought of that moment. That very night, the fall of that night, the piles of snow that had gently embraced her small back as she fell, and the fingertips that pressed into her armpits. She had no memory of the face. The two disappeared from Soon-il's life much too soon. Her dad had chaired the village committee in the basement of the People's Army, and went missing when the tides of war turned. He was advised that he would live should he turn himself in. So he went towards the Southern Army to surrender himself, but he never returned. Soon-il did not know where and how he died, or why he was unable to return, but she heard about her mother's death. A disease had broken out in the village. Her mother was unable to refuse the request by a sick neighbour who couldn't fetch water from the well for himself. She brought a bucket of water into the ailing neighbour's house and caught the disease.

으로 불러내 그를 따라나섰는데 목적지에 당도하고 보니 전에 가본 적 없는 큰 집이었다. 종이를 바른 분합문들이 등자쇠에 걸려 대들보를 향해 들려 있었다. 방이 많았다. 그 많은 방을 일일이 들여다보며 돌아다닌 기억이 이순일에게 있었는데 꿈인지 환시인지 방들은 비어 있었고 바람을 다 통하게 해두어 구들이 싸늘하게 식어 있었다. 이순일이 지쳐 그중 어느 방에서 마당을 내다 보고 있을 때 수염을 조잡하게 기른 노인이 마당을 건너다 말고 애, 니 엄마 어디 갔느냐 묻고 킬킬 웃었다. 입속이 까맣다. 그런 노인을 그런 집 마당에서 본 기억이 있었다. 아마 그날 엄마가 죽었을 거라고 이순일은 순자에게 말했다. 그날이 돌아가신 날일 거라고.

네가 슬펐겠구나.

순자가 말했고 이순일은 그렇지 않았다고 답했다. 당시엔 뭘 모르는 애기였으니까..... 슬프거나 하지도 않았고, 조금 더 자라고 나서야 그런 생각을 할 수

It was before the troops came down from the north. Soon-il remembered eating and sleeping for a few days around that time in a room where only children gathered. One day, her uncle came and called on her to go see her mother together, and she followed him into the courtyard. But when they arrived at the destination, she found it was a huge house she had never been before. Paper-lined sliding doors hung from the metal hoops above and were lifted towards the ceiling beams. There were many rooms. Soon-il could make out distant memories of wandering around the house, peering into each and every one of them. But as if in a dream or illusion, the rooms were empty, and the knobs were cold from the draft that had been let through. When Soon-il grew tired and looked out into the yard from one of the rooms, an old man with a scraggly beard stopped in his tracks while crossing the yard, and sneering, asked, ‘Hey, where is your mother?’ His giggling mouth was black. I recalled seeing such a man in the yard of that house. That must have been the day my mother died,

있었다고 이순일은 말했다. 순자가 이순일에게 어머니의 이름을 물었기 때문에 시작된 이야기였다.

한세진이 독일에 간다고 말했을 때 이순일은 순자를 찾아보라고 말했다. 너 거기 가면 순자를 만나봐라, 순자를 찾아봐. 한세진이 눈을 깜박이며 이순일을 보았다.

그게 누군데?

순자.

순자가 누구야?

순자를 몰라?

누군데?

니가 순자를 모른다고? 이순일은 어리둥절해 한세진을 바라보았다. 이 애가 순자를 모르는구나. 강원도 철원군 갈말읍 토성리 갈골에서 부모와 사별한 순

Soon-il told Soonja. That must have been the day when she died.

You must have been sad.

Soonja said, and Soon-il replied that she wasn't. Since I was only a child, I couldn't have known then... There was nothing for me to feel sad about. And it was only after I grew a little older that I was even able to think about it in such ways. This was a story that began all because Soonja asked Soon-il about her mother's name.

When Se-jin told her mother Soon-il that she was going to Germany, Soon-il urged her daughter to find Soonja. When you get there, meet Soonja. Look for her. Se-jin blinked and looked at Soon-il in surprise.

Who is that?

Soonja.

자, 지경리에서 할아버지와 살던 순자, 그리고 그 순자가 열다섯살 때 경기도 김포군 양서면 송정리에서 만난 순자. 내 동무, 이웃, 동갑이자 동명同名인 순자. 내가 순자의 뺨을 때렸고 순자는 울지도 않았다. 이 이야기를 다 어떻게 할까, 어디부터. 이순일은 말문이 막혀 한세진의 얼굴을 보았다.

그분이 독일에 계셔?

그렇다고 답하려다가 그게 사실이 아니라는 걸 이순일은 알았다. 이순일은 1967년 이후로 순자와 대화를 한 적이 없었다. 송정리 시장 일부와 인근 집 몇 채를 전소시킨 화재가 일어난 뒤로는 얼굴조차 본 적이 없었다. 그런데도 이순일은 여태 자기가 그렇게 믿었다는 걸 알았다. 순자는 독일에 있다. 독일에 갔고, 독일에 있다. 보고 들은 것처럼 그 믿음이 생생했다. 왼쪽 가슴에 태극기를 바느질로 붙인 투피스 양장을 입고 스타킹에 구두를 신고 장시간 비행을 각오하듯 질끈 묶은 머리를 하고 뒤를 돌아보는 순자. 반백인 머리를 짧게 자

Who is Soonja?

You don't know Soonja?

Who is she?

How do you not know Soonja? Confused, Soon-il stared at Se-jin. This kid doesn't know Soonja. Soonja, who was orphaned in Gangwon-do Cheorwongun Galmal-eup Toseong-ri Galgol village after the death of her parents. Soonja, who had lived with her grandfather in Jigyeong-ri. Soonja, whom she had met when she was fifteen in Gyeonggi-do Gimpo-gun Yangseo-myeon Songjeong-ri. Soonja, my comrade, neighbour, friend of the same age and same name. Soonja, who didn't even shed a tear when I slapped her on the cheek. How do I recount all these stories? Where do I begin? Soon-il fell speechless and stared at Se-jin's face.

Is this person in Germany? asked Se-jin.

르고 단색 니트 셔츠를 입고 순하게 늙은 모습으로 흰 벽을 등지고 앉아 웃고 있는 순자. 이순일은 참, 이상한 일도 있다고 생각했다. 보지도 듣지도 못한 순자의 과거와 현재가 왜 내게 이렇게 선명한가. 애, 니 엄마 어디 갔느냐. 생각할수록 너무 선명해 꿈이고 거짓인 것 같은 광경들.

그러면 이것은, 하고 이순일은 생각했다.

이것은 누구의 꿈일까. ☒

Soon-il was about to say yes, but then realised it wasn't true. She hadn't spoken to Soonja since 1967. The last time she had seen her face was when the fire consumed part of Songjeong-ri Market and several adjacent houses. And yet, Soon-il believed it to be true. Soonja was in Germany. She had gone to Germany and remained there. Soon-il believed these words as vividly as if she had seen and heard them from Soonja herself. Soonja, turning around in a backward glance, dressed in a two-piece suit with the Korean flag sewn onto her left breast, wearing stockings and dress shoes, her hair tied back in a tight bun as if she were gearing up for a long flight. Soonja, with her greying hair cut short and wearing a plain knitted shirt, gracefully aged and smiling at her with her back leaned against a white wall. What a strange sight, Soon-il thought to herself. How is it possible that these visions of Soonja's past and present, which she had never actually witnessed, are so vivid to me? *Hey, where is your mother?* The harder she pondered, the clearer it became, so clear that it seemed

to Soon-il to be a dream and a lie.

Then, this is... Soon-il thought.

Whose dream is this?    ☒

사는 동안 순자,라는 이름을 가진 사람을 자주 만났다.

순자가 왜 이렇게 많을까?

이 책은 그 질문에서 시작되었다.

「무명無名」은 1946년생 순자씨의 피란 이야기를 듣고 썼다.

순자씨를 인터뷰하는 과정에서 순자씨와 나는

순자씨의 이야기가 전부 끊어져 있다는 걸 알았다.

목적어가 자주 사라졌고 시간과 공간이 뒤섞였으며

다섯마디 이상으로 말이 이어진 적이 거의 없었다.

순자씨는 매번 숨을 몰아쉬는 것처럼 말 몇마디를 내게

던졌고 그런 다음엔

자주 말문이 막혀 나를 바라보기만 했다.

Over the course of my life, I have met numerous persons by  
the name of Soonja. Why are there so many Soonjas?

This book began with that question.

I wrote ‘A Name Unknown’ after hearing the war  
displacement story of Soonja, who was born in 1946. While  
interviewing her, Soonja and I both came to realise that her  
story was all but disjointed. The grammatical objects of her  
sentences often elapsed, time and space became muddled,  
and she rarely said more than five words at a time. When  
she did speak at length, it was as if she was gasping for  
breath, uttering several words at once before falling silent  
again, only to stare at me.

「무명<sup>無名</sup>」을 쓰면서 이 소설을 순자씨가 말하는 방식으로 써야 한다고 생각한 시기가 있었다.

그러나 노력에 그쳤고

그 노력의 일부를 소설에 남겨두었다.   ☒

There was a time while writing ‘A Name Unknown’ when I thought that I should compose the novel in the way Soonja spoke. But it remained only an aspiration, some vestiges of which I have left in the novel.   ☒