

Selected and Translated by

Kim Chong-un

and Bruce Fulton

A Ready-Made Life

EARLY MASTERS OF MODERN KOREAN FICTION

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Translators' Preface

This is a collection of Korean short fiction predating 1945. Our selection of that year as a chronological boundary is based not only on its importance in modern Korean history—it marked the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonial rule—but also on the Korean literature community's convention of demarcating the Korean literature of the present century into "modern" (kŭndae), or pre-1945, and "contemporary" (hyŏndae), or post-1945.

Korean fiction of the pre-1945 period is ill served in translation, both in quantity and quality, and the need for a representative anthology covering those years has long been felt. But rather than attempting a definitive, canonical collection, we have selected stories on the basis of their appeal to us, their brevity (the title story notwithstanding), and their unavailability in English translation. To our knowledge, only two of the stories have appeared previously in English, and both of them exercise such a hold on us that the temptation to attempt a new translation could not be withstood. Above all we have tried to reflect in our selection the great variety of styles and stylists in early modern Korean fiction.

We wish to thank Ju-Chan Fulton for reviewing drafts of several of the stories, Paul La Selle for commenting on the title story, and an anonymous reviewer for the University of Hawai'i Press for comparing our translations word for word with the original Korean versions and detecting some of the miscues that are inevitable in any work of translation. The usefulness of Kwon Youngmin's Hanguk kundae munin taesajon (Encyclopedia of modern Korean authors) in preparing the biographical notes is gratefully acknowledged. We also wish to thank the editors of Korea Journal, The World & I, Korean Culture,

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Thanks are also due to the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation, which assisted us with a translation subsidy; and to the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies for a travel grant that enabled us to work together.

Finally, we are grateful to the late Marshall R. Pihl, mentor, colleague, and friend, who was a constant source of encouragement during the lengthy development of this project. We dedicate the book to his memory with great affection.

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KIM CHONG-UN AND BRUCE FULTON

Pew modern literatures have developed as rapidly as that of Korea. At the end of the nineteenth century many Korean writers still wrote in Chinese, the classical literary language, though the admirably precise native script, hangŭl, had existed since the mid-1400s. But by the 1920s Korean fiction writers had begun producing works in hangŭl that, while bearing noticeable similarities in style to Western fiction, were unmistakably Korean in tone, theme, and outlook. And by the 1930s Korea had produced several masters of the short story form. How did this rapid development come about?

The history of early modern Korean fiction, extending from the late teens to Liberation from Japanese colonial rule, must be seen first and foremost in light of the nation's colonization by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Japanese rule offered a not always consistent blend of oppression and enlightenment whose legacy is still debated. It seems clear, though, that the Japanese presence played a significant role in modern Korean literary history, in that the modernization movement that swept East Asia beginning in the late 1800s was centered in Japan. The lure of modernization drew many young Koreans to Japan for their higher education, and it was there that many aspiring writers indeed many of the writers represented in this anthology—became acquainted with Western forms of literature, which were widely available in Japanese translation. Hwang Sun-won, for example, Korea's preeminent short fiction writer, read such authors as O. Henry, Maupassant, Turgenev, Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Hemingway, in addition to the Japanese authors Shiga and Dazai, while studying at Waseda University. Perhaps more important for the future of modern Korean fiction, young Korean intellectuals saw for the first time, in Natsume Sōseki and others, the possibility of creative writing as a profession. Returning to Korea, they quickly put these experiences to use, founding literary magazines and publishing there and in newspapers as well.

Interpretations of these early developments, and of the origins of modern Korean literature in general, tend to follow two almost antithetical lines. The great majority of Korean literature specialists in Korea emphasize the native elements of modern Korean literature. They stress the literary contributions of Pak Chi-wŏn and other *shir-hak* (practical learning) scholars of the 1700s. It was those writers and scholars, they argue, who represent the origins of modern Korean literature and modern Korean thought. Other Korean scholars, most of them trained in Western literatures, emphasize the influence of the Western tradition. A more persuasive view is that modern Korean literature derived to an important extent from both native and foreign traditions. As Marshall R. Pihl has noted:

In seeking formative influences on writers of early modern [Korean] fiction, like Ch'ae Man-shik and Yi Kwang-su, we must consider not only historical influences (Confucian didactic materials in Korean, vernacular written fiction, Buddhist narratives, and oral literature) but also contemporary experiments in Korean composition (Bible translation; reports, editorials, sketches, and anecdotes in early newspapers; and textbooks for modern education). In addition, we must also look at the growing impact of foreign literary culture, particularly Japanese (or Japanized), and judge its role in the rapidly changing state of Korean writing during the era of early experimentation and the ensuing take-off of the 1920s.

The reality of the Japanese occupation, which was driven home by the brutal imperial policies that led to Korea's March 1, 1919, Independence Movement, had the effect of popularizing *hangŭl* as a vehicle for literary expression by Koreans. After crushing the independence movement, imperial Japan tried a new tack—the so-called Cultural Policy. In this climate of relative freedom of artistic expression, Korean literature began to flower. But with the outbreak of the Pacific War, colonial policy once again became oppressive. During the latter years of the occupation, when Japan banned materials writ-

^{1.} Marshall R. Pihl, "Narrative Technique in Korean Fiction, 1860-1940" (paper presented to the annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies, New Orleans, 1991), 3.

ten in Korean, and when some Korean writers took the fateful step of writing in Japanese, the very act of writing in *hangŭl* was a courageous political statement and an affirmation of artistic freedom.

The rapid development of short fiction in early modern Korea is due in large part to its status as the genre of choice for those fiction writers who saw themselves as champions of pure literature. Novels were commonly serialized in newspapers but were disdained by the pure literature school as hack work turned out by didactic writers. In any event, distinctive short story stylists had appeared in numbers by the 1930s, and they wrote in a variety of styles. At least two of them, Yi Sang and Ch'ae Man-shik, are still among the most modern of modern Korean writers in terms of their artistic imagination and free-wheeling narrative style. The accomplishments of the early modern writers may be seen in the ironic fact that many of these impecunious authors turned out short gems instead of padding their stories to get more money (Korean authors were and still are paid by the manuscript page); whereas today financially secure writers write long, discursive stories that often cry out for editing. It is an incalculable loss to modern Korean fiction that so many early modern writers died young: Hyŏn Chin-gŏn at forty-two, Yi Sang at twenty-six, Na To-hyang at twenty-five, Kim Yu-jong at twenty-nine, Yi Hyo-sok at thirty-five, Ch'ae Man-shik at forty-eight.

Korean short fiction of the 1920s tends to be strongly realistic, reflecting both the familiarity of most authors with the realist traditions of French and Russian literature, and the mood of a people whose hopes for self-determination had been crushed. The establishment of the Korean Artist Proletariat Federation (KAPF) in 1925, tolerated by the Japanese because it served to divide Korean nationalists, proved a further stimulus for the production of realist fiction, and especially works that reveal class consciousness, such as Yi Ki-yŏng's "A Tale of Rats," included in this volume.

In 1935 the KAPF was forced to disband. Already by then, virtually any reference in literature to socialism or to inflammatory political issues was being blue-penciled into oblivion by the colonial censors. Under these circumstances many Korean short fiction writers concentrated on refining their craft and sharpening their creative imagination. The result is some of the best Korean short fiction of the century, most of it produced in the mid-1930s. Yi Hyo-sŏk's "When the Buckwheat Blooms," written in Korea's literary golden year of 1936, is an example of structural perfection. Another fre-

quent type of story was the character sketch, often depicting a misfit, as in Kim Tong-ni's "A Descendant of the Hwarang" and Yi T'aejun's "An Idiot's Delight." Other writers produced stylized stories that bore little resemblance to contemporary Korean realities. Kim Tong-in's "The Photograph and the Letter," for instance, is interesting for its subversion of gender stereotypes. Other stories reconsidered the effects of Korea's Confucian heritage. Chu Yo-sŏp's "Mama and the Boarder," one of the best-loved of all Korean stories, is a poignant account, told from the point of view of a six-year-old girl, of a young widow prevented by Confucian dictates from remarrying. Other early masters returned to the Korean countryside for inspiration. Kim Yu-jong's "Wife," a brilliant first-person narrative, is written almost completely in pure Korean vocabulary, a striking achievement in that some 50 percent of the Korean language consists of Sino-Korean words. Hwang Sun-won, sometimes unfairly pigeonholed as a rural writer, did produce splendid works with rural settings, among them the tragicomic "Mule."

Like all good literature, the best of early modern Korean fiction is susceptible to multiple readings. The most obvious interpretation of many early modern stories is that their oppressiveness and gloom conceal an anticolonial subtext. But these early works can also be read as the collective record of a people whose life choices in general were severely restricted, not just by colonization, but by education (either too little or too much, as the title story shows), and by a highly structured society that left little opportunity for misfits. In this respect, many Koreans in the occupation period were restricted to a "ready-made life." More recently, and especially since South Korea's democratization movement in the late 1980s, when domestic restrictions on Marxist writings were lifted, Marxist readings have become popular. Freudian readings are also useful; Hwang Sun-won, for one, has acknowledged his familiarity with Freud, and it is highly probable that Yi Sang, Kim Tong-ni, and Ch'ae Man-shik drew artistic inspiration from Freudian thought as well. Finally, though, in this age of rampant critical jargon, we should not forget that the stories in this book, like all good literature, can be read simply for enjoyment.

Two groups of early modern Korean writers deserve special mention: the *wŏlbuk* writers (those who moved from the U.S.-occupied south to the Soviet-occupied north after 1945) and women

writers. Writings by *wŏlbuk* writers were banned in South Korea until the late 1980s and democratization. In the years since, scholars and readers are rapidly becoming acquainted or reacquainted with the wealth of writing by such authors as Yi T'ae-jun, Yi Ki-yŏng, and Pak T'ae-wŏn, who combine pointed social observation with accomplished style.

Women writers played an important role in the development of the modern Korean short story. Kim Myŏng-sun's "Ŭishim ŭi sonyŏ" (A suspicious girl, 1917), for example, is among the very first modern Korean stories. Like their male counterparts, young Korean women intellectuals studied in Japan and participated in the formation of Korean literary journals and their associated circles. There is reason to believe, though, that the patriarchal nature of Korean society in general and of the Korean literature field in particular restricted the range of themes open to women writers. Significantly, early modern women writers such as Kim Myŏng-sun, Yi Wŏn-ju, and Na Hye-sŏk, who advocated freedom of lifestyle and flouted Korean social conventions, were ostracized and their careers curtailed. Kim was hounded into insanity, Yi became a nun, and Na turned to painting. Other women writers, such as Kang Kyŏng-ae and Paek Shin-ae, died young. Ch'oe Chong-hui, represented in this anthology, and Pak Hwa-sŏng were two of the few women who lived long enough to remain active after Liberation.

Most of the authors in this anthology lived and flourished before 1945. Of the remainder, two in particular made the transition to contemporary fiction and enriched it immeasurably in the course of their long careers. Hwang Sun-wŏn went on to become Korea's greatest short story writer, an author whose protean range defies categorization. And Kim Tong-ni came to be regarded by many as the Korean writer best able to express in his fiction that which is thought to be uniquely Korean. Ch'ae Man-shik survived for a short time into the post-Liberation era, producing satiric sketches as well as muted, soul-searching accounts of the dilemma of the artist in a colonized society. (While Hwang Sun-wŏn was evading the colonial authorities at his family home and continuing to write fiction that had to wait years to see the light of day, Ch'ae was being accused of not taking a more active role in opposing the Japanese.)

In the rush for globalization and the fervor for a Nobel Literature Prize in 1990s Korea, the works of these and other early masters tend

to be downplayed. This is unfortunate, for contemporary Korean fiction writers have much to learn from that group of writers in terms of economy of expression and command of the Korean language. It is to be expected that further study, reading, and exposure of pre-1945 Korean fiction will solidify its standing as the foundation of contemporary Korean fiction.

A Society That Drives You to Drink

Hyŏn Chin-gŏn

Hyŏn Chin-gŏn was born in Taegu in 1900 and was educated there and in Shanghai. He later worked for the Shidae ilbo and Tonga ilbo newspapers.

Hyŏn first appeared in print in 1920 with the story "Hŭisaenghwa" (Sacrifical flowers), published in the literary journal Kaebyŏk. This story was soon followed by other works of fiction, such as "Pinch'ŏ" (The destitute wife, 1921) and "T'arakcha" (The degenerate, 1922), that, like the story translated here, depict the forbidding problems faced by an intellectual class whose society struggles to modernize. "Unsu choŏn nal" (A lucky day, 1924) and "Pul" (Fire, 1925) are perhaps his two best-known stories. The former, as darkly realistic a story as any in modern Korean fiction, juxtaposes a husband's windfall and his wife's death. The latter depicts a teenage wife driven to distraction by brutalities suffered on her wedding night. Both can be read as allegories of occupied Korea.

In 1926 Hyŏn collected these and other stories in his *Chosŏn ŭi ŏlgul* (Faces of Korea). These slices of life in colonial Korea are peopled almost uniformly by individuals oppressed by forces beyond their control. This volume established Hyŏn as one of the fathers of Korean realist fiction, along with Kim Tong-in and Yŏm Sang-sŏp.

"A Society That Drives You to Drink" (Sul kwŏnhanŭn sahoe), also included in Chosŏn ŭi ŏlgul, first appeared in Kaebyŏk in 1921. It is a passionate, if overstated, account of enlightened minds trying to overcome factionalism and other vestiges of traditional Korean society. It also reveals the plight of the great majority of Korean women who went unschooled and thus could not benefit intellectually from their country's modernization.

Ya!" Scowling, she interrupted her solitary sewing with this weak outcry. The needle had stabbed beneath her left thumbnail. Her thumb trembled faintly and cherry-red blood appeared beneath the white nail. She quickly extracted the needle and pressed down on the wound with her other thumb. At the same time, she

gingerly pushed the sewing down into her lap with her elbow. Then she let up on her thumb. The area showed no color; perhaps the bleeding had stopped. But then from beneath the pallid skin the crimson oozed forth once again in a flowery network and a drop of blood no larger than a millet grain welled up, barely visible, from the wound. Nothing to do but press down once more. Again the bleeding seemed almost stanched, but if she relaxed the pressure it soon resumed.

She would have to bandage the wound. Pressing down on her thumb, she looked into her wicker sewing basket. A scrap of cloth suitable for the purpose lay beneath a spool of thread. She pushed the spool aside and tried to take the cloth between her little fingers. But it remained caught beneath the spool, as if glued there, and for all the world she couldn't grasp it. The two fingers could only scrape helplessly against the cloth.

"Why can't I pick you up!" she finally cried, on the verge of tears. And then she glanced about the room, as if looking for someone who could help. But no one was there except, perhaps, for phantasms of her own making. Outside it was dead still but for the dreary, steady drip of water from the faucet. Suddenly the electric light seemed to brighten. It glinted from the glass face of the wall clock, and the hour hand, pointing at one o'clock, glared menacingly at her. Her husband still hadn't returned.

She could scarcely believe they'd been married seven or eight years already. But if she were to calculate the time they'd actually spent together, it might not amount to a single year. For as soon as they had married, upon his completing high school in Seoul, he had gone to Tokyo to study. And there he had graduated from college. How anxious, how lonesome she had been during that long period! In spring she would breathe in the scent of the laughing flowers, in winter hot tears would cover her icy pillow. How she missed him the times her body ached, the times her soul despaired! But all this she endured stoically, indeed welcomed. For one day he would return. This thought consoled her, gave her courage.

What was her husband doing in Tokyo? Well, he was studying. But what did that mean? She wasn't really sure. Nor did she need to bother herself to learn. Whatever it was, it was supposed to be the best, the most valuable thing in the world. It was like the goblin's spiked club that granted all wishes, as related in that tale from the old days: if he wished for clothing, then clothing would appear; and

the same with food, money.... Her husband could wish for anything—no request was impossible—and he would return with it from Tokyo. Occasionally she saw his relatives wearing silk clothing and gold rings. It was an eye-opening sight, one that made her envy them deep down inside, but later she would think, "When my husband returns!..." And she would cast a look of contempt at these luxuries.

Finally he was home for good. A month passed, and then another. But his activities seemed inconsistent with her expectations. He was no different from those who hadn't studied. Well, actually there was a difference: Others made money; her husband, though, spent money, his family's money. It seemed like he was always gadding about somewhere. And when he did stay at home, he was usually lost in a book or else he was up half the night writing something.

That must be how you make the magic club—this was how she interpreted it.

A couple of more months passed. Her husband's work seemed unchanged. The only obvious difference from before was that he now and then heaved a great sigh. And his face was all tensed up, as if something was troubling him. His body seemed to droop more with each passing day.

What's bothering him? his wife wondered. And she too grew troubled. She made various attempts to restore what was wasting away. She tried as best she could to add tasty dishes to his meals, and she made things such as oxtail soup. But it was all in vain. Her husband took little food, saying he had no appetite.

Several more months passed. Now he was always at home. And he was so irritable. He kept saying he was aggravated.

Once, as dawn was approaching, she half awoke and groped for him. But all she clutched was the flap of his quilt. Sleepy though she was, she felt a pang of disappointment. She opened her drowsy eyes, as if looking for something she had lost. There sat her husband, head down on his desk and clasped between his hands. As the haze lifted from her mind, she realized his shoulders were heaving. He was sobbing. The sound echoed in her ears. Instantly her mind cleared and she sat up. She went to his side and gently patted him on the back.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked in a pinched tone.

But he said not a word.

She reached for his face and felt warm tears.

Another month or two passed. Her husband frequently went out again, as he had upon returning from Tokyo. When he finally came

home late at night, his breath stank of liquor. This was a recent development.

And on this particular night, he still hadn't returned. From early in the evening she had entertained all sorts of wild thoughts as she awaited him impatiently. To speed up the tedious passage of time, she had resumed her sewing. But even this work hadn't gone as she had wanted. Now and then her needle had gone astray, and finally she had pricked her thumb.

"Where could he be all this time!"

In her annoyance, she forgot the stinging sensation in her thumb. For an instant, the images and fantasies she had been entertaining once again surfaced in her mind. Dishes of tasty food on a white table-cloth embroidered with rare and wonderful flowers flashed before her eyes. And then a scene in which several of his friends offered each other drinks and gulped them down. The disgusting spectacle of some *kisaeng* bitch enticing her husband with a flirtatious smile. Her husband chuckling like a moron. And then, all of it disappearing, as if behind a black curtain, and in their place a meal table in disarray; bright light glancing off liquor bottles; that *kisaeng* girl, one arm propping herself up on the floor, doubled up and almost choking on her laughter. And finally there appeared her husband sprawled in the street, weeping.

Suddenly the gate rattled and a thick voice cried out: "Open up!"

"I'm coming!" she blurted, and out she went to the veranda. Her slippers, put on too hastily, scuffed along as she rushed across the courtyard. The inner gate wasn't yet bolted for the night, and the servants in their quarters beside it were always fast asleep by then, so she hurried to the outer gate herself. Her slender hand, white in the darkness, took the bolt and worked at it. The gate opened.

The chill of the nighttime breeze settled against her face. No one was there! Not a single human shadow to be seen. Only the deep blue night shrouding the faint white of the alleyway.

She lingered, a look of astonishment on her face. And then she hurriedly shut the gate, as if to prevent a devil from entering.

So it was the wind, she told herself as she caressed her cool cheeks. With a sheepish grin she retraced her steps.

But I'm sure I heard him.... Maybe I just didn't see him.... I wonder if he was lying on the ground where I couldn't see him....

These thoughts brought her to a stop at the inner gate.

Maybe I'll take another look.... No, no, no, it was all in my head.... But what if?.... No, no, no, it was all in my head.

Vacillating like this, she reached the veranda, like someone sleepwalking. And then the queerest thought flashed through her mind like lightning: do you suppose he came in without my noticing him?

Sure enough, she thought she heard sounds coming from their room. Surely someone was moving about in there. Like a child about to catch a scolding from a grownup, she tiptoed to the door. Reaching toward the threshold, she smiled in spite of herself; it was the smile of a child asking forgiveness for a mistake. Ever so carefully she opened the door. The quilt seemed to be moving.

Look at him, all wrapped up, trying to fool me, she told herself. She sat down and kept still, as if sensing something awful might happen if she touched the quilt. But finally she lifted it. The white sleeping mat was all she saw.

"What! He's not back?" she cried out tearfully. She seemed finally to have accepted the fact.

It was well past two in the morning when he returned. There was a thud, followed immediately by someone calling "Missus! Oh Missus!" She awakened thinking she was still sitting up, but found herself sprawled on the quilt. So sound asleep had she been that the elderly maid, herself a heavy sleeper, had had to open the outer gate. Then and there the wife's dreamy wanderings came to an end and she gathered her wits. She rubbed her face once or twice and was out the door.

Her husband lay on his side on the veranda, a leg hanging over the edge, head nestled in the crook of his arm. His breathing was raspy.

The old maid yanked his shoes off, then stood up, a scowl furrowing her swarthy face.

"Come, sir, get up and go inside, please."

Barely able to move his tongue, he mouthed an answer: "All right." But he didn't budge. The lids of his vacant, sleepy eyes gently drooped.

His wife rubbed her eyes.

"Come, sir, get up," said the maid. "Go on inside now, please."

This time there wasn't an answer. Instead he reached out a hand. "Water, water—cold water," he mumbled.

The maid quickly poured water in a bowl and thrust it beneath the nose of the hopelessly drunken man. But he made no effort to drink it. It was as if he had forgotten his own request.

"Won't you drink, sir?" the maid reminded him.

"Mmm, all right," he said. Finally he propped himself up on one