



# Introduction

I was born and raised in Poryŏng, South Ch'ungch'ŏng Province, at that time a village of fewer than 200 households. My birth took place on Ch'usŏk, the day of the Harvest Moon Festival, 15 August by the lunar calendar, and I arrived around the time the full moon rose, after a morning of ancestral offerings of newly harvested crops and a day of fun activities.

Middle school was the happiest time of my childhood. Despite the two-hour walk to school each way, I was proud to wear my school uniform, the hat at a rakish angle. My favourite subjects were history and Korean, which included literature, and I still remember our Korean teacher reading, a section at a time, 'Mama and the Boarder', the third story in this anthology. I, in turn, used to read it to my elder sister, who wasn't able to attend middle school. Best of all, the nearby American army base had given our school library one thousand books. This was a blessing because in the early 1960s, so soon after the Korean War, it was difficult to buy books of any kind, even our middle-school textbooks. And so I took out one or two books a day. I was obsessed with reading, and by the time I finished school I had read almost all the books in the library. From the beginning I was thrilled by fiction, to the extent that my goal in life changed from ship's captain to author. I never achieved that precious dream, which had taken form as I read in the light of the oil lantern, losing all track of time, but I never abandoned it either.

It was also in middle school that I began to understand the importance of fiction as a form of prose literature. Until then, when my friends and I talked about fiction, we spoke of it as something nonsensical and fabricated – not surprising when you consider that *sosŏl*, the Korean word for fiction, derives from two Chinese characters that literally mean 'small talk', or, more commonly, 'unimportant story'. But, ultimately, I realized that fiction bears a close relationship to everyday life.

Leaving home at the age of twenty, decked out in a sweater and outsized police boots, I arrived in Seoul, the first in my village to enter university.

## *Introduction*

Four years later, in my senior year at Seoul National University, I made my debut as a writer. In Korea, one of the ways you become an established writer is to win one of the New Year literature competitions sponsored by the daily newspapers in Seoul. You can submit work in one of three categories – poetry, fiction or literary criticism. I submitted a piece of literary criticism, and I won. And so it was that I made my debut as a literary critic, not as a writer of fiction.

It took another four long years in an MA programme to disabuse myself of the notion of being a creative writer. The turning point came one day in our department's graduate student reading room, when a visiting professor from Japan asked our professors how many authors of fiction we had in Korea and how many fictional works had been published since the turn of the century. Despite my limited facility in Japanese, it was clear to me that my professors were faltering in their responses and I had to sneak out of the room in shame, my face burning. I pledged to myself that if I ever encountered that professor again, I would be capable of readily providing him with clear answers, and from that day on I buried myself in our library to research the modern literature of our country. And now, almost fifty years later, as Korean popular culture increasingly drives global cultural production, the time is right to share with readers a collection of stories that affirms Korea's rightful place in world literature.

## Tradition

As I have mentioned, fiction bears a close affinity with everyday life. And life for many of us, and certainly for most Koreans, is invested with tradition. Which is why, I suppose, when times are especially difficult – as they were from 1910 to 1945, when Korea was a colony of imperial Japan; or during the Korean War of 1950–1953 that followed the division of the country into north and south; or, more recently, during the almost three decades of military dictatorship – it is from tradition that writers have often drawn comfort. For those of us on the Korean Peninsula, tradition springs from an agrarian lifestyle; from religious faith that draws liberally on native spirituality, Buddhism and more recently Christianity; and from a social system comprising a limited number of venerable clans and

## *Introduction*

governed by neo-Confucian expectations of proper relations between monarch and subject, family members, men and women, and the four classes of scholar, farmer, artisan and merchant (in descending order of status). Koreans in the new millennium might not readily articulate tradition in this way, but you can bet that over the course of generations of family history it has become ‘a hitching post’ in their psyche, to use the title of a trio of stories by the late Pak Wansö, a writer featured in this anthology.

Yi Hyosök (1907–1942) was a ‘fellow traveller’ author in his earlier stories – one who was sympathetic to the working class but did not belong to the short-lived proletarian literature movement in colonial Korea. By the mid-1930s, when fictional works touching on the strictures of colonial society increasingly risked being censored, he had returned from the city to the countryside for inspiration for his stories. Yi was still in his thirties when he was claimed by meningitis in 1942. ‘When the Buckwheat Blooms’ (‘Memilkkot p’il muryöp’) is set in the mountainous P’yöngch’ang area of Kangwön Province that was Yi’s home (and the site of the 2018 Winter Olympics). In this story tradition is personified by Hō Saengwön, an itinerant peddler whose rounds take him to one of the every-fifth-day markets found practically everywhere in the countryside even today. Hō happens to be left-handed, making him a rarity in a society that values conformity. Liberated from the daytime bustle of the marketplace, he is bewitched by the play of the full moon on the brilliant white buckwheat blossoms as he yarns to his companion Cho Söndal about a night of passion he enjoyed some twenty years earlier. At the end of the story, he notices that Tongi, a young peddler he has befriended, is also left-handed. At the same time, he recalls that his faithful donkey, though getting on in years, has managed to sire a colt. This story contains most of the essential characteristics of Yi’s fictional world: a writing style reminiscent of lyric poetry; close harmony of setting, character and event; and meticulous composition.

Ch’ae Manshik (1902–1950) is one of the most distinctive voices of modern Korean fiction. Gifted in description and dialogue, he wrote several memorable plays. By the time he passed away, scant weeks before the outbreak of the Korean War – which he predicted with uncanny prescience in his 1948 novella ‘Sunset’ (‘Nakcho’) – he had published enough literary work to constitute a ten-volume edition of his complete works. Ch’ae was

## Introduction

fond of retelling tales of old, especially the story of Shim Ch'öng, a Korean paragon of filial devotion, as well as works from abroad, such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. 'A Man Called Hüngbo' ('Hüngbo-sshi') is based on the well-known tale of two brothers, Hüngbu and Nolbu, the former young, helpless and sweet and the latter older, crooked and powerful. In Ch'ae's retelling, younger brother Hüngbu is recast as 'good ol' Hyön', a well-meaning but incapable fellow who is kind to all but struggles to fulfil even the simple promise of bringing a bento box to his disabled daughter. In the original tale, a good heart begets good fortune. But Ch'ae rejects such traditional values. Good ol' Hyön is weak and thwarted at every turn. Life under colonial rule has become so desperate that kindness by itself no longer suffices.

Like Yi Hyosök, Chu Yosöp (1902–1972) wrote stories early in his career that realistically depict the miserable life of the lower class. But in his stories from the 1930s onwards he examines the inner life of women bound by traditional gender expectations. The narrator of 'Mama and the Boarder' ('Sarang sonnim kwa ömöni') is six-year-old Okhüi, who describes what happens between her young, widowed mother and a young man who rents the study in their home. Okhüi is an unwitting mediator between the two adults, conveying the boarder's love letters to her mother, even though she cannot comprehend their contents or the inner conflicts of the adult world. Despite Okhüi's desire for the boarder to become her father, her mother restrains her feelings and ultimately rejects his love because of the convention that a widow should not remarry. But rather than emphasizing issues of societal ethics and morality, author Chu has the mother reaffirm herself by pledging to her young daughter that the girl will always be her first priority.

Yi Munyöl (b. 1948) is a politically conservative author who uses myth and history to create contemporary fables. His richly textured classical writing style has marked out new territory for prose writing in Korean, in works that variously problematize the territorial, ideological and psychic division of the Korean Peninsula and the violence permeating South Korean politics. His father went to North Korea during the Korean War, never to return, an event that has shaped much of his fiction. Yi's columns have appeared in the *New York Times*, and he runs a creative writing centre in his ancestral home that nurtures aspiring authors. His linked-story

## Introduction

novel *You Can't Go Home Again* (*Kūdae tashi nūn kohyang e kaji mot'ari*) deploras lost tradition, as seen in the story included here, 'The Old Hatter' ('Sarajin kōt tūl ūl wihayō'). Old Top'yōng has spent his life weaving traditional Korean hats in his ancestral village for men to wear over their topknots, which were a symbol of male adulthood in the Chosŏn period (1392–1910). Times have changed, however, and the village has been subjected to billowing modernization. The old man tries hard to pass on his skills, but young people wishing to inherit the artisanship of a bygone era are hard to find. His efforts to train a successor in hat-making having failed, the old man visits the grave of a low-born friend who kept his topknot until his death, and offers him a lifetime's masterpiece of a hat, before burning it. Top'yōng's unfortunate life story, related with wry irony by the narrator in the form of flashbacks to his childhood, honours traditions deemed trivial and consigned to oblivion amid the currents of modernization.

We could say that for Kim Taeyong (b. 1974), literature was salvation. While completing his compulsory military duty as a medic, he was hit by an explosion that left him with burns over 80 per cent of his body. Confined indoors for a year in order to avoid sunlight, and unable to sleep, he attempted suicide, and only then did a desire to express himself in writing restore in him a strong desire to live. Like many of the younger writers represented in this volume, he studied creative writing at university level.

He has described the writing experience of 'Pig on Grass' ('P'ulbat wi ūi twaeji') as one of the smoothest of his life – perhaps because the father-son relationship looms so large in Korean tradition? It is an impressive story, clever, playful and witty, while also serious and poignant. The author's humorous treatment of weighty subject matter may appeal to readers who consider modern Korean fiction overly gloomy. The author invites us inside the mind of a man suffering from dementia, his dead wife and their pig still a living presence in his life. Not until the end of the story, when the man's son visits to remind him that he is soon going abroad and cannot leave him alone to fend for himself, do we learn that his wife is deceased. The implication of this – that the father may end up in a nursing home – would not so long ago have been an outrage in a society in which parents traditionally lived under the same roof as their eldest son and his family until death.

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## Women and Men

The authors of the stories in this section are divided between men and women, but only one-third of the stories in the volume overall are written by women. Does this mean that in modern Korea women are less accomplished than men as writers of fiction? No, it is a reminder, rather, that until the modern period, female writers were discouraged from displaying their literary works in public, which was viewed as the sphere of upper-class men. Today women are perhaps more visible than men, whether they write literary fiction or genre fiction. But traditional gender-role expectations remain in play, as we shall see in the following stories.

Pak T'aewön (1910–1986) was born and educated in Seoul and published poetry in his teens before making a transition to fiction. Later in life he wrote historical fiction. He disappeared from Seoul in 1950, only to re-emerge after the Korean War in North Korea, where he continued to write until his death in 1986. Over thirty years later, his grandson Bong Junho (Pong Chunho) would achieve international fame when his Korean-language film *Parasite* won four Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. 'A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist' ('Sosölga Kubo-sshi üi iril') is one of the seminal works of literary modernism of 1930s Korea. Kubo is modelled on Pak T'aewön himself – Kubo was one of his pen names – and his story begins and ends with the most important woman in his life, his mother. It follows him from morning to night as he saunters about Kyöngsöng, as Seoul was known during the era of Japanese occupation. His aimless wanderings recall the French poet Baudelaire, whose verse was inspired by his walks in Paris, as well as the so-called 'modern boys' of 1930s Japan, who moseyed about Tokyo's glitzy Ginza neighbourhood. What does Kubo see as he roams the colonial capital, notebook in hand, recording the changes in daily life that he encounters? Streets for vehicles where the city walls once were; a tram line; Kyöngsöng Station, hub of a Peninsula-wide rail network; a zoo and playground replacing a 500-year-old palace; the new Japanese Government-General building blocking the view of Kyöngbok Palace; the wall of Töksu Palace and, close by, the Bank of Chosen (the Japanese name for its Korean colony); Japanese residential neighbourhoods and commercial districts with

## *Introduction*

department stores, pharmacies, coffee shops and cafés; entertainment districts – all of it emblematic of colonial modernity. The only unchanged place is the start and end point, his home, where we are presented with the humble image of his fretful mother doing her household chores and sewing. The stream-of-consciousness narrative is complemented by original illustrations by Pak's friend and fellow writer Yi Sang.

Kim Yujōng (1908–1937) published only twenty-eight stories and one short-story collection in his short life. And yet his stories continue to be enjoyed today for their command of native Korean vocabulary, to such an extent that high-school students writing their all-important university entrance exam will find his works cited in the set of questions testing their proficiency in Korean. 'Spicebush Blossoms' ('Tongbaek kkot') tells of a budding relationship between a boy and girl in the countryside. The boy, our first-person narrator, and the girl, Chōmsun, are from different social classes: he is the son of a tenant farmer and she is the daughter of the overseer who collects the farmers' rent. But instead of focusing on class issues, the story portrays the awakening feelings of the girl and boy, the latter too naive and insensitive to recognize that the girl's antagonistic behaviour disguises her attraction to him. Notably, all the action in the story is initiated by Chōmsun. Only towards the end does the boy exhibit his own aggressive behaviour, which ironically leads to his submission to her. In the homespun setting, their courting is like a landscape painting brought to life by Kim's signature brand of humour.

Ch'oe Yun (b. 1953) is a rare combination of creative writer, professor (of French literature) at an elite university and literary translator. Her first published work of fiction, the novella 'There a Petal Silently Falls' ('Chōgi sori ōpsi han chōm kkonip i chigo'), uses three narrative voices to describe the trauma of a girl whose mother has been shot dead in the May 1980 government massacre of citizens in the city of Kwangju. Since then, she has continued to experiment with narrative method and style. 'The Last of Hanak'o' ('Hanak'o nūn ōpta') is masterful in its restraint and irony as it exposes the prejudices against women that men collectively exhibit in their daily lives. While in college a group of young men, including the story's narrator, diminish the eponymous Hanak'o with a nickname focusing on a single facial feature – her nose – and repeatedly reveal their self-interest and immaturity in their dealings with her. As the years pass,



## Introduction

they find in her a uniquely comfortable presence, but fail to appreciate her sincerity or to recognize her for who she is, an accomplished young woman in a same-sex relationship. Not until the end of the story are she and her partner revealed as an internationally known design team. The title of the story (a literal translation of which would be ‘There Is No Hanak’o’) is in my view a manifesto of female identity, suggesting that reductive images of womanhood no longer have meaning in a society working towards gender equality.

Hong Sökchung (b. 1941) is a native of Seoul, but in 1950 went to North Korea with his father, a Korean-language scholar, and his grandfather, author of *Im Kkōkchōng*, a multi-volume novel about a historical bandit. Hong has stated in an interview that he wanted to be a scientist but was encouraged by Kim Jong-il, former Supreme Leader of North Korea, to write historical fiction. *Hwang Chini* was born of a desire to restore the richness of the Korean language and traditional Korean culture. The novel was published in Pyongyang in 2002 and was awarded the prestigious Manhae Literature Prize in South Korea in 2004. Responding to Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il’s suggestion to break the cookie-cutter mould of socialist realist fiction that had dominated the North Korean literary landscape, Hong produced a novel that displays a lively historical imagination, creative use of the dialects of the two Koreas, and a literary style replete with proverbs, metaphor, folksy slang, monologue and elegant poetic expression. The eponymous protagonist is born to a *kisaeng*, a profession that denies her and her offspring a place in the traditional class structure. Chini is trapped in the contradiction of her status as the daughter of a patrician man and an outcaste mother. In forming a relationship with Nomi, a commoner, she breaks free from a class structure that oppresses women, an effort that begins in the excerpt here, in which Chini publicly renders herself accountable for the death of a young man who was infatuated with her. In doing so, she rejects the life of a parasitic being in the shadow of men, and stands proudly as an independent agent of her life.

In the fiction of Ch’ŏn Unyōng (Ch’ŏn Un-yōng, b. 1971) women relate to men in unusual ways. In her 2011 novel *The Catcher in the Loft* (*Saeng-gang*), a young woman shelters her fugitive father, a torture operative serving the military dictatorship of 1980s South Korea, from the authorities. ‘Needlework’ (‘Panül’), her debut story features a daughter and mother

## Introduction

who both use needles (tattooing needles and *hanbok*-stitching needles, respectively) to take control of the male body. Needles are tools that cause pain and are capable of evoking a sadistic impulse. The daughter prefers hand-tattooing to machine-tattooing because it gives her more agency over her male clientele. In taking control of male bodies as she tattoos them, she is also serving the needs of men who compensate for their feelings of inferiority and even emasculation by wanting to look dominant. In this way, the story is a chillingly sharp depiction of the tensions between conflicting desires, and the shifting power dynamics between the genders.

## Peace and War

This section is titled ‘Peace and War’ rather than ‘War and Peace’, a reminder that the two Koreas – the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) – remain, technically, in a state of war, there being no formal treaty to conclude the 1950–1953 Korean War. The division of the Korean Peninsula into two separate countries, at the conclusion of the Second World War in August 1945, followed by the establishment of a US military government in what is now South Korea and the presence of Soviet military advisors in the North, continues to loom large in the psyche of the Korean people, many of whom have family on opposite sides of the DMZ (the ironically named demilitarized zone), which separates South from North.

Hwang Sunwŏn (1915–2000) had direct experience of the division of Korea and of the civil war that followed. Born near Pyongyang in present-day North Korea, he migrated with his family in 1946 to Seoul, now in South Korea. During the war he and his family, along with countless other Koreans, were displaced to refugee communities, first in the city of Taegu and then in the city of Pusan on the southeast coast of the peninsula. Originally a poet, Hwang soon turned to fiction and became arguably the most accomplished writer of short fiction in modern Korea. He wrote over 100 short stories, including the coming-of-age classic ‘The Cloudburst’ (‘Sonagi’), which is read in Korean schools. He is also one of very few Korean writers to write directly of the battlefield experience. (More

## *Introduction*

commonly, writers of his generation focused on the after-effects of the war.) His war stories and novels embody not only the civil strife of the late 1940s and early 1950s but also the equally important conflicts taking place within individual souls struggling to survive on the battlefield. In delineating the spiritual chaos experienced by the young generation who survived the spectre of death in battle, these works question the meaning of life and the potential for human salvation. ‘Time for You and Me’ (‘Nō wa na man ūi shigan’) features a wounded captain, a lieutenant and a private first-class trying to break through an enemy siege. The question soon arises – are the men better off looking out only for themselves, or should they stick together? Hwang was introduced to Freudian thought during his years at Waseda University in Tokyo, and his capacity for understanding basic instinct and the operation of the human psyche in the most desperate of circumstances is showcased in this story. The translators of the story once asked the author how he was able to depict battlefield survival stories so realistically – was he himself a veteran of the war? No, he answered, but he had sought out the stories of battlefield survivors – a testament to the foundations of his masterful storytelling skill.

I must confess that Pak Wansō (1931–2011) is my favourite writer. For forty years she bestowed on her readers sharp critiques leavened with gentle satire on how the ethics, values and norms of the Korean family have been overturned by the experiences of the colonial period, the division of the nation and war. What distinguishes her narratives above all else is her colloquial style, which imbues her fiction with an almost palpable empathy that earned for her the affectionate nickname ‘the auntie next door’. ‘Winter Outing’ (‘Kyōul nadūri’) is a story-within-a-story. The narrator is a devoted mother and wife, but is increasingly discontented with her husband. Seeking a respite, she travels to a hot spring, and at the inn where she spends the night she encounters an elderly woman with a peculiar habit of shaking her head. It is revealed that this is the result of trauma from the war, when the old woman inadvertently revealed her son’s hideout to enemy soldiers and he was executed before her eyes. Thus do the wounds from the civil war continue to fester decades later. Through a deep sympathy for the elderly woman and her family, the narrator is able to free herself from her own internal conflicts.

Much of the fictional work of Cho Chōngnae (b. 1943) narrates how

## Introduction

the sufferings of the colonial period and the tragedy of the Korean War have influenced the lives of Koreans. Intertwined with this is the theme of resentment, caused by the conflict between rich and poor. ‘Land of Exile’ (‘Yuhyōng ūi ttang’) analyses the damage from the war sharply. The protagonist loses everything: his ancestral village, to which he can never return after shedding blood there; and his family – both the wife he slaughters, along with the People’s Army commander who seduced her, and the son he must give up for adoption at an orphanage. As vice-chairman of the North Korean People’s Army unit occupying the village where he was born, Mansōk takes the helm in massacring the reactionary clan that previously controlled it. But after killing the People’s Army commander he must escape, erasing his identity, and begin a new life of constant wandering, a kind of self-exile. Few writers have proved more adept than Cho at exploring how individual enmity stemming from social inequality and prejudice expanded into ideological conflict before, during and after the Korean War. His ten-volume novel *T’aebaek sanmaek* (*The T’aebaek Mountains*, 1989) is the summit of his career and a sterling achievement of literature focusing on the nation’s division.

## Hell Chosōn

*Hell Chosōn* is a term that has only recently come into popular usage in South Korea, but its roots go all the way back to the Chosōn Kingdom (1392–1910), when the attainment of rank consequent to passing the government civil service exam was the aim of every young man in any self-respecting clan. Today the term reflects the discontent of a generation of young people who have dutifully obtained a university education (and in many cases studied abroad) only to find a paucity of jobs commensurate with their education. More generally the term reflects disappointment with a lifestyle marked by economic inequality, crony capitalism, excessive work hours and inadequate salary, and the societal manifestations of this malaise, such as the highest suicide rate among the OECD nations, a negative birthrate and a divorce rate that hovers around 30 per cent. More recently you will find on social media the term *t’alcho*, the *t’al* meaning ‘escape’ and the *cho* referring to Chosōn – in short, ‘leave Chosōn’.

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## Introduction

The desire to escape Chosŏn is made clear at the end of Yi Sang (1910–1937)’s classic story ‘Wings’ (‘Nalgae’). Yi Sang is the pen name of Kim Haegyŏng; he adopted it as a wry commentary on the Japanese convention of addressing an individual by his or her family name followed by the title *san* – in his case, he was mistakenly called Yi, a family name almost as common as Kim in Korea. He is a writer who has always interested me, to the point that I compiled a five-volume collection of his writings *Collected Writings of Yi Sang* (Yi Sang chŏnjip, 2009). In the 1930s he caused a sensation with his imaginative stories and experimental poetry. ‘Wings’ is one of the highlights of Korean modernist literature. The narrator is an incapable intellectual, a self-described ‘stuffed genius’. He lives a bizarre life with his wife, a prostitute, who represents the pathology of the city. He desires to break the bounds of his meaningless existence in ‘my room’, a dark, cramped space partitioned off from the lighter and airier space where his wife receives her clients. To reach the outside world he must pass through his wife’s space. His frustrated desire to escape culminates with him perched on the roof of the Mitsukoshi Department Store wanting to cry out, *Sprout again, wings! Let me fly, fly, fly; one more time let me fly*. Will he jump? And if so, will he do so out of a desire for transcendence, out of naked anger at his inability to escape, or in symbolic defiance of imperial Japan’s occupation of his homeland?

In the 1960s we saw the emergence of the first generation of Korean writers to be educated in their own language (during the colonial period, the language of instruction was Japanese, and before then, boys fortunate enough to attend one of the village ‘academies’ were taught Chinese characters), and by virtue of this they are called the Hangŭl Generation, Hangŭl referring to the Korean alphabet. Coming of age during the first two decades of the Republic of Korea and experiencing both the triumph of the 19 April 1960 Student Revolution, which resulted in the resignation of heavy-handed President Yi Sŭngman (Syngman Rhee), and the oppressiveness of military dictatorship following the May 1961 coup led by young officers loyal to Park Chung Hee, these writers combined mordant critiques of a society in rapid transition with an imaginative world-view.

We might think of writer and visual artist Kim Sŭngok (b. 1941) as the genius of this generation. When the Yi Sang Literature Prize, the most prestigious award for literary short fiction in South Korea, was launched

## Introduction

in 1977, it was Kim who was the first recipient. But he was unable to make a living from fiction and ultimately turned to writing screenplays. He was born in Osaka, Japan, but returned to Korea with his family in 1945. The protagonists of 'Seoul: Winter 1964' ('Söul, 1964nyön kyöul') are a young public servant, a university student and a man in his mid-thirties who has just sold his wife's corpse to a university hospital, where it will be dissected by medical students. These three lead different lives but share the experience of alienation from the massive metropolis and the despair and boredom that this engenders. This sense of alienation reaches a climax in the story with the not entirely unexpected suicide of the third man.

O Chönghui (Oh Jung-hee, b. 1947) was once asked in an interview to explain what she considers to be good writing. She responded that she admires writing that feels truthful but leaves her ill at ease, head aching and mind swirling with thoughts. She likes stories that must be read slowly because of the pointed questions they raise. And she likes works that leave ample space for the reader, while, as far as possible, concealing the writer's voice. She is by now admired almost universally by critics but has yet to attract a wide readership. Perhaps this is because her early stories are populated by characters with destructive impulses expressed through motifs such as physical deformity, kleptomania, infertility and pyromania. The narratives in her subsequent story collections focus more on coming of age and trauma. Absence figures prominently in several of her stories, including 'Wayfarer' ('Sullyeja üi norae'). The protagonist of this story is a middle-class housewife who is also a talented puppet-maker. She has recently been discharged from a psychiatric hospital, following an incident in which she stabbed a burglar. Abandoned by her family, she returns to an empty house and the start of a lonely journey to liberate herself from a world in which human relationships are destroyed by prejudice and misunderstanding.

Kyung-sook Shin (Shin Kyung-sook, b. 1963) is from a village in North Chölla Province. She was the first South Korean and first woman to win the Man Asia Literature Prize (2012), for *Please Look After Mother* (*Ömma rül put'ak hae*). Better known as a novelist, she is especially adept at a type of fable-like short story that often explores family dynamics. 'House on the Prairie' ('Pölp'an wi üi chip') is a ghost story about trauma and memory, in which reincarnation links happiness and misfortune. The author is

## Introduction

perhaps playing the role of *mudang*, the practitioner (by definition female) of native Korean spirituality, who in the performance of her rituals often channels the voices of those who have died a premature and/or unnatural death ('Then why did you push me, Mummy?').

P'yŏn Hyeyŏng (Pyun Hye-young, b. 1972) began publishing in 2000. She writes about the duality of human nature, which hides anxiety and subversive urges within the comfort and tranquillity promised by civilization. One of her novels was inspired by the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Japan, many of the casualties of which resulted from panic. 'The First Anniversary' ('Ch'ŏtpŏntchae ki'nyŏmil') depicts the repetitive but stressful life of a delivery person – a worker seen everywhere in Korea today. The protagonist's regular route involves making deliveries to a woman on an upper floor of an apartment building mostly vacated due to an urban renewal project. The woman is rarely at home and the delivery man takes her items home with him instead of leaving them to pile up at her apartment door. He eventually locates her at a nearby amusement park and they go on a Ferris wheel ride together. He tries to suppress his fantasy that he is on a date with her by sharing his résumé with her, but she responds with a list of all the items that remain undelivered to her; they are unable to make a connection with each other. Whether viewed from the Ferris wheel gondola or the window of the woman's apartment, the landscape is populated by dour multi-family residential construction, much of it the half-basement apartments that symbolize the ambiguities of life in Hell Chosŏn.

Choi Suchol (b. 1958) is a native of the city of Ch'unch'ŏn and made his debut in 1981, influenced by his father, a Korean-language schoolteacher and himself an aspiring writer. His fiction tends to be impressionistic and abstruse, but his thematic interests have expanded steadily, and his unconventional writing style is distinctive. No other fiction writer has been nominated more times for the Tongin Literature Prize, the oldest Korean award for literary fiction. Recently he has focused on the legacy of the Korean War, as in his linked-story novel *The Dance of the POWs* (*P'oro tül ūi ch'um*). The novel was inspired by his discovery of Magnum photos taken at a prisoner-of-war camp off the south coast of Korea in which the inmates, shrouded by hoods to protect their anonymity, are seen dancing with each other. 'River Dark', ('Kŏmŭn kang'), written in 2001, foretells

## Introduction

an ecological malaise that would be revealed in real life a decade later. The World Wetland Network recognizes countries for their efforts in wetland management, with Grey Globe awards drawing attention to poor practices. In 2012 South Korea received a Grey Globe for a river project implemented without a proper environmental assessment. Ground water was found to be polluted, and the newly dammed rivers exhibited ‘rotten water mass’. The story, in which the protagonist reminisces fondly about his visits to a neighbourhood stream while on a remote island, foreshadows this debacle. It is an all-too-rare example of fiction tackling the theme of environmental degradation in Korea.

## Into the New World

The title of this section originated in the last chapter of *What Is Korean Literature?* a book that I authored with the editor of this anthology. It draws on an iconic song of that name by the K-pop idol group Girls’ Generation, reflecting the increasing prominence of women writers in Korean fiction at the dawn of the new millennium. Six of these writers are represented in this anthology, including Kyöngsuk, Ch’ön Unyöng, P’yön Hyeöng, Hwang Chöngün, Kim Aeran and Han Yujoo. Among these writers from the new millennium, we also see a movement away from traditional realist narratives and towards more metafictional stories about language and the process of writing itself.

If Kim Süngok is the presiding genius of the Hangül Generation, then Ch’oe Inho (1945–2012) was its child prodigy. There is a well-known story about the small, second-year high-school boy who arrived to accept a new writers’ award wearing his black student uniform only to have the master of ceremonies, who mistook him for a stand-in, bark at him, ‘Where’s your big brother?!’ Ch’oe was the youngest writer ever to have a novel serialized in a newspaper, the first writer to be photographed for a book jacket, the first creative writer to make a living from his work, and the author with the most film versions of his works (some twenty of them, the scripts for some of which he wrote himself). His novel *Homeland of the Stars* (*Pyöl tül üi kohyang*) was an instant million-volume bestseller that earned him a month-long world tour and prompted a host of bar girls to change their



## Introduction

work name to Kyōng'a, after the heroine of the novel. In earning a popular readership Ch'oe broadened the appeal of Korean literary fiction in general. Unsurprisingly, considering that he was a native of Seoul, much of his fiction foregrounds the urban landscape that was the central space of Korean life during industrialization from the 1960s on. Often deploying a playful, speculative style, his works convey the shock of new living patterns, such as the shift from the multi-generation family in the ancestral village to the impersonality of the metropolitan apartment building. 'The Poplar Tree', one of three linked stories constituting the series titled 'Strange People' ('Yisanghan saram tül'), is a fable and a coming-of-age story with elements of magical realism.

Hwang Ch'ōngūn (Hwang Jung Eun, b. 1976) is also a native of Seoul and for a time played the hourglass drum in a Korean traditional percussion band. Her works depict the marginal figures who live a shadowy existence in a traditional class- and status-based society. Hwang gives voice to these individuals, to victims of violence and to those who are homeless and abandoned. In 'The Bone Thief' ('Ppyō toduk'), a man initiates a journey in the dead of winter to raid the funerary urn of his male lover, who has been killed in an accident. The story shows how the suppression of homosexuality, via which conventional gender norms forbid mourning for a deceased lover, generates hatred and 'ethical violence'.

Jung Young Moon (b. 1965) taught himself English as a *Katusa* (a Korean soldier attached to the US Army) during his mandatory military service. To make a living he has translated more than 50 books from English to Korean. His writing is characterized by a sardonic sense of humour, beguiling dialogue and a linguistic rhythm in even the longest of sentences. He is more interested in human nature and its cross-sections than in plot-driven works. His fiction tends to have no story line but instead takes readers along for the ride, following the narrative wherever it may go. 'Home on the Range' ('Yangtte mokchang') is a whimsical story in which the narrator, who is working at a friend's sheep farm, visits a local market and nearby temple, his conversations with a monk and two elderly women providing comic relief from his constant daydreaming.

Kim Chunghyōk (b. 1971) has a diverse résumé – web designer,

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## Introduction

illustrator, webtoon artist, book and film reviewer, music columnist, restaurant industry writer and, of course, author. ‘Glass Shield’ (‘Yuri pangp’ae’) is a wry take on a central aspect of Hell Chosŏn – unemployment among those fresh out of university. The two friends transform the all-important first-job interview into performance art and thereby become celebrities. But in spite of their efforts, they do not find meaningful work, and seem ultimately bound to part ways forever, like the two young men in ‘Seoul: 1964, Winter’.

Han Yujoo (b. 1982) made her debut as a writer at the age of twenty-two and has since produced a significant body of recursive, metatextual narratives. She utilizes a playful, almost magical sense of wordplay and has an unsettling tendency to establish a situation and then negate it. She encourages readers to approach her stories as they see fit, professing to write intuitively and saying that there is no right way to read and enjoy her work. ‘Black-and-White Photographer’ (‘Hŭkpaek sajinsa’) presents us with a black image and a white image. Both are of a primary-school boy kidnapped with a demand for an outrageous ransom. In the black image he is strangled; in the white image he is released. Either way, ambiguity remains. The story eschews a linear plotline – an intentional disturbance that renders the boy’s narrative unreliable. This style of writing reminds us that what we are reading is fictional – an important realization, given that some Korean netizens have suggested that this story was the model for a 2018 kidnapping of an eight-year-old girl that ended in tragedy.

Kim Aeran (b. 1980) displays a precocious gift for storytelling. ‘The Future of Silence’ (‘Ch’immuk ūi mirae’) is a dazzling tale, partly inspired by Nicholas D. Evans’s non-fiction work *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*. According to this book, the next century will see more than half of the world’s 6,000 languages become extinct, and most will disappear without being adequately recorded. In Kim’s story, the Museum of Moribund Languages is devoted to housing and recording the sole surviving speakers of minor tongues. The story is a fable that explores how the languages that sustain civilization are born and die. By using the spirit of the last speaker of a dead language as her narrator, Kim is in effect reanimating human destiny. Underpinning the

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*Introduction*

story is a profound sorrow, the residents of the museum knowing they will never again enjoy a genuine conversation in their mother tongue. With their death, the language dies too. And with the death of a language, an anthology such as this one becomes impossible.

Kwon Youngmin

# Editorial Note

The emergence of the short story is one of the great ironies of modern Korean literature. In the beginning there was only *sosŏl*, literally ‘small talk’, as Kwon Youngmin mentions in his Introduction to this anthology, but generally understood today as ‘fiction’. There was no generic distinction based on the length of the narrative. Not until the early 1900s, when the Enlightenment movement swept East Asia, did the Western-style short story arrive on Korean shores, typically by way of Japan. Though considered something of a Western import, the genre quickly assumed elite status, and today the most prestigious Korean awards for domestic fiction go primarily to the short story.

The reader will note, in the Further Reading section, a variety of anthologies of short fiction. One might legitimately ask, Why another one? For the late Kevin O’Rourke and myself, the answer was simple: we wanted a collection of stories that have engaged us over the decades – indeed in several cases compelled us to translate them – and we wanted stories that come alive as works of English-language literature.

I have forsaken the common practice of arranging the contents of an anthology in chronological order, preferring instead to highlight several recurring themes to be found in Korean stories. Korean fiction has earned a reputation, to an extent deserved, of being gloomy and depressing, but the reader will see in the Tradition, Women and Men and Into the New World sections glimpses of humour, albeit often sardonic, that offer insight into the lives of the inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula past and present. And lest readers be intimidated by the Peace and War and Hell Chosŏn designations, a reminder that a dash of empathy may leaven a disturbing narrative with a modicum of hope, healing and closure.

For readers desiring to read the stories in chronological order:

1. Pak T’aewŏn, ‘A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist’ (1934)
2. Chu Yosŏp, ‘Mama and the Boarder’ (1935)

*Editorial Note*

3. Kim Yujöng, 'Spicebush Blossoms' (1936)
4. Yi Hyosök, 'When the Buckwheat Blooms' (1936)
5. Yi Sang, 'Wings' (1936)
6. Ch'ae Manshik, 'A Man Called Hüngbo' (1939)
7. Hwang Sunwön, 'Time for You and Me' (1958)
8. Kim Süngok, 'Seoul: Winter 1964' (1965)
9. Pak Wansö, 'Winter Outing' (1975)
10. Yi Munyöl, 'The Old Hatter' (1979)
11. Cho Chöngnae, 'Land of Exile' (1981)
12. Ch'oe Inho, 'The Poplar Tree' (1981)
13. O Chönghüi, 'Wayfarer' (1983)
14. Ch'oe Yun, 'The Last of Hanak'o' (1994)
15. Kyung-sook Shin, 'House on the Prairie' (1996)
16. Choi Suchol, 'River Dark' (2001)
17. Ch'ön Unyöng, 'Needlework' (2001)
18. Hong Sökchung, a chapter from *Hwang Chini* (2002)
19. Jung Young Moon, 'Home on the Range' (2003)
20. Kim Chunghyök, 'The Glass Shield' (2006)
21. Kim Taeyong, 'Pig on Grass' (2006)
22. P'yön Hyeyöng, 'The First Anniversary' (2006)
23. Han Yujoo, 'Black-and-White Photographer' (2007)
24. Hwang Chöngün, 'The Bone Thief' (2011)
25. Kim Aeran, 'The Future of Silence' (2013)

With the exception of the excerpt from Hong Sökchung's novel *Hwang Chini*, each of these is a discrete work of fiction.

Many of the stories herein appeared previously in periodicals or anthologies, the editors and publishers of whom are gratefully acknowledged here; facts of publication are cited in the Permissions.

Compiling an anthology is necessarily a team effort, and I have several individuals to thank. The immediate inspiration for this collection was a presentation at the University of Washington by Jay Rubin on his *Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories*. Jay was kind enough to connect me with his Penguin editor, Simon Winder, who in turn put me in touch with Jessica Harrison, an editor with heart, vision and endless patience. I am grateful as well to the other members of the Penguin team: Louisa Watson for her

*Editorial Note*

sensitive and gracious copy-editing of the manuscript; Rebecca Lee for coordinating editorial-production in a timely manner; and Edward Kirke for the thankless job of copyright clearance. Thanks are due to the translators, among whom I wish to single out two who are no longer with us, Kim Chong-un and Marshall R. Pihl. Both were mentors I revered, and I shall forever remember the translations I did with the former as a master class in Korean-to-English literary translation. I also wish to mention that several of the stories were translated or co-translated by former students of mine at the University of British Columbia. Primary thanks are reserved for three individuals. Kwon Youngmin, a professor at Seoul National University and the University of California, Berkeley, has been a mentor, colleague, co-editor, co-author and friend for forty years; I can think of no one more capable of introducing this anthology. Kevin O'Rourke was a respected friend and colleague attuned like perhaps no other to the heart and soul of the Korean literary tradition. He played a strong role in text selection, contributed two translations to the volume and assisted on a third, and should be regarded as the spiritual co-editor of this volume. Finally, Ju-Chan Fulton, life partner and co-translator, contributed materially to the volume and remains a source of unflagging energy at a time when life seems increasingly to be having its way with the denizens of the globe.

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# Further Reading

Korean names appear as spelled and ordered in the published volume.

## Short-Story Collections by Writers in This Volume

- Ch'ae Man-shik. *My Innocent Uncle*. Ed. Ross King and Bruce Fulton. Trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton, Kim Chong-un and Bruce Fulton, and Robert Armstrong. Seoul: Jimoondang, 2003. (Includes the stories 'My Innocent Uncle,' 'A Ready-Made Life,' and 'Once Upon a Paddy.')
- Ch'ae Manshik. *Sunset: A Ch'ae Manshik Reader*. Ed. and trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Choe In-ho. *Deep Blue Night*. Trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. Bloomfield, N.J.: Jimoondang, 2002. (Comprises the title story and 'The Poplar Tree.')
- Ch'oe Yun. *There a Petal Silently Falls: Three Stories by Ch'oe Yun*. Trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Hwang Sun-won. *The Book of Masks*. Ed. Martin Holman. London: Readers International, 1989. (Stories from his last collection of short fiction.)
- Hwang Sunwŏn. *Lost Souls: Stories*. Trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. (Contains the story collections *The Pond*, *The Dog of Crossover Village*, and *Lost Souls*.)
- Hwang Sun-wŏn, *Shadows of a Sound*. Ed. Martin Holman. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1990. (Stories covering his entire career.)
- Hwang Sun-won. *The Stars and Other Korean Short Stories*. Trans. Edward W. Poitras. Hong Kong: Heinemann Asia, 1980.
- O Chŏnghŭi. *River of Fire and Other Stories*. Trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Pak Wansŏ. *My Very Last Possession*. Ed. Chun Kyung-Ja. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1999.

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## Further Reading

### Short Stories by Other Writers

- Cho Se-hŭi. *The Dwarf*. Trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. (A linked-story novel, each story of which may be read independently.)
- Kim Tong-in. *Sweet Potato*. Trans. Grace Jung. Croydon, UK: Honford Star, 2017.
- Lee Ho-Chul (Yi Hoch'öl). *Panmunjom and Other Stories*. Trans. Theodore Hughes. Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2005.
- Oh Yong-su (O Yöngsu). *The Good People: Korean Stories by Oh Yong-su*. Trans. Marshall R. Pihl. Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1985.
- Yang Kwija. *A Distant and Beautiful Place*. Trans. Kim So-Young and Julie Pickering. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. (A translation of the linked-story novel *Wönmi-dong saram tül*. Each of the stories may be read independently.)
- Yi Cheong-jun (Yi Ch'öngjun). *Two Stories from Korea*. Portland, ME: MerwinAsia, 2016. (Contains 'The Wounded', trans. Jennifer Lee, and 'The Abject', trans. Grace Jung.)
- Yi Ch'öng-jun (Yi Ch'öngjun). *The Prophet and Other Stories*. Trans. Julie Pickering. Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 1999.
- Yi T'aejun. *Dust and Other Stories*. Trans. Janet Poole. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Kim Young-ha. *Photo Shop Murder*. Trans. Jason Rhodes. Seoul: Jimoon-dang, 2003. (Contains the title story and 'Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator?')

### Anthologies

- Chun Kyung-Ja, trans. *The Voice of the Governor General and Other Stories of Modern Korea*. Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2002.
- Fulton, Bruce, ed. *Waxen Wings: The Acta Koreana Anthology of Short Fiction from Korea*. St Paul, MN: Koryo Press, 2011.

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### Further Reading

- Fulton, Bruce and Ju-Chan, trans. *The Future of Silence: Fiction by Korean Women*. Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2016.
- *The Red Room: Stories of Trauma in Contemporary Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. (Stories by Pak Wansö, O Chönghui and Im Ch'öru.)
- *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1987. (Stories by O Chönghui, Kang Sökkhyöng and Kim Chiwön.)
- Holstein, John, trans. *A Moment's Grace: Stories from Korea in Transition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2009.
- Hughes, Theodore, Jae-Yong Kim, Jin-kyung Lee and Sang-Kyung Lee, eds. *Rat Fire: Korean Stories from the Japanese Empire*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2013.
- Kim, Chong-un, trans. *Postwar Korean Short Stories*. 2nd edn. Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1983.
- , and Bruce Fulton, trans. *A Ready-Made Life: Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998.
- Lee, Peter H., ed. *Flowers of Fire: Twentieth-Century Korean Stories*, rev. edn. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986.
- O'Rourke, Kevin, trans. *Ten Korean Short Stories*. Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1971. (Also published as *A Washed-Out Dream*. Seoul: Korean Literature Foundation, 1980.)
- Park, Sunyoung, trans. in collaboration with Jefferson J. A. Gatrall. *On the Eve of the Uprising and Other Stories from Colonial Korea*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2010.
- Pihl, Marshall R., ed. and trans. *Listening to Korea*. New York: Praeger, 1973. (A collection of stories and essays.)
- Pihl, Marshall R., and Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton, trans. *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*, expanded edn. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007.
- Reunion So Far Away: A Collection of Contemporary Korean Fiction*. Seoul: Korean National Commission for Unesco, 1994.

*Further Reading*

Periodicals

*Seeing the Invisible* (Korea-themed issue of *Manoa*, 8, no. 2 [1996]). Five stories from South Korea's post-democratization period by women writers.

*The Wounded Season* (Korea-themed issue of *Manoa*, 11, no. 2 [1999]). Five stories relating to the Korean War and the May 1980 Kwangju Uprising.

*Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature and Culture*.

# Note on Korean Name Order and Pronunciation

By convention, Korean names are cited with the family (clan) name first, followed by the given name, the former consisting usually of one syllable and the latter consisting usually of two syllables, which may be separated by a hyphen or (as in this anthology) spelled as one word. Thus the family name of the author of the Introduction is Kwon and the given name consists of the elements Yŏung and Min. (The spelling preferred by the author is Kwon Youngmin.)

Romanized Korean vowels are pronounced somewhat as follows: *u* as in *tune*; *o* as in *pope*; *a* as in *father*; *i* as in *leap*; *e* as in *skate*; and *ae* as in *set*. Two other vowels are distinguished by a breve (˘): *ö* is pronounced like the *u* in *run*, and *ü* is pronounced like the *oo* in *book*. An apostrophe distinguishes aspirated consonants (those pronounced with a strong puff of air). Thus, for example, the *Chʼ* in the family name Chʼoe is pronounced like the *ch* in *chalk*. In the absence of an apostrophe, *ch* is also pronounced as in *chalk* but with a weaker puff of air.

Certain well-known place names, such as Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), and Pyongyang, capital of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), are by convention spelled without the breve and/or apostrophe.

Authors' names are often spelled idiosyncratically by commercial publishers in the West. Authors in this volume who are known by variant spellings are identified as such in parentheses in the Introduction.

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# TRADITION

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# YI HYOSŎK

## *When the Buckwheat Blooms*

Translated by Kim Chong-un and Bruce Fulton

Every peddler who made the rounds of the countryside markets knew that business was never any good in the summer. And on this particular day, the marketplace in Pongp'yŏng was already deserted, though the sun was still high in the sky; its heat, seeping under the awnings of the peddlers' stalls, was enough to sear your spine. Most of the villagers had gone home, and you couldn't stay open for ever just to do business with the farmhands who would have been happy to swap a bundle of firewood for a bottle of kerosene or some fish. The swarms of flies had become a nuisance, and the local boys were as pesky as gnats.

'Shall we call it a day?' ventured Hŏ Saengwŏn, a left-handed man with a pock-marked face, to his fellow dry-goods peddler Cho Sŏndal.

'Sounds good to me. We've never done well here in Pongp'yŏng. We'll have to make a bundle tomorrow in Taehwa.'

'And walk all night to get there,' said Hŏ.

'I don't mind – we'll have the moon to light the way.'

Cho counted the day's proceeds, letting the coins clink together. Hŏ watched for a moment, then began to roll up their awning and put away the goods he had displayed. The bolts of cotton cloth and the bundles of silk fabrics filled his two wicker hampers to the brim. Bits of cloth littered the straw mat on the ground.

The stalls of other peddlers were almost down, and some groups had got a jump on the rest and left town. The fishmongers, tinkers, taffy-men and ginger sellers – all were gone. Tomorrow would be market day in Chinbu and Taehwa, and whichever way you went, you would have to trudge 15 to 20 miles through the night to get there. But here in Pongp'yŏng the marketplace had the untidy sprawl of a courtyard after a family



gathering, and you could hear quarrels breaking out in the drinking houses. Drunken curses together with the shrill voices of women rent the air. The evening of a market day invariably began with the screeching of women.

A woman's shout seemed to remind Cho of something.

'Now don't play innocent, Saengwŏn – I know all about you and the Ch'ungju woman,' he said with a wry grin.

'Fat chance I have with her. I'm no match for those kids.'

'Don't be so sure,' said Cho. 'It's true that the young fellows all lose their heads over her. But you know, something tells me that Tongi, on the other hand, has her wrapped right around his finger.'

'That newbie? He must be bribing her with his goods. And I thought he was a model youngster.'

'When it comes to women, you can never be sure . . . Come on now, stop your moping and let's go have a drink. It's on me.'

Hŏ didn't think much of this idea, but he followed Cho nonetheless. Hŏ was a hapless sort when it came to women. With his pock-marked mug, he hesitated to look a woman in the eye, and for their part women wouldn't warm to him. Midway through life by now, he had led a forlorn, warped existence. Just thinking of the Ch'ungju woman would bring to his face a blush unbecoming a man of his age. His legs would turn to rubber, and he would lose his composure.

The two men entered the Ch'ungju woman's tavern, and sure enough, there was Tongi. For some reason Hŏ himself couldn't have explained, his temper flared up. The sight of Tongi flirting with the woman, his face red with drink, was something Hŏ could not bear. Quite the ladies' man, isn't he, thought Hŏ. What a disgraceful spectacle!

'Still wet behind the ears, and here you are swilling a brew and flirting with women in broad daylight,' he said, walking right up to Tongi. 'You go around giving us vendors a bad name, but you still want a share of our trade, it seems.'

Tongi looked Hŏ straight in the eye. Mind your own business, he seemed to be saying.

When the young man's animated eyes met his, on impulse Hŏ lashed Tongi across the cheek. Flaring up in anger, Tongi shot to his feet. But Hŏ, not about to compromise, let fly with all he had to say.

'I don't know what kind of family you come from, you young pup, but

if your mum and dad could see this disgraceful behaviour, how pleased would they be! Being a vendor is a full-time job – there's no time for women. Now get lost, right this minute!

But when Tongi disappeared without a word of rejoinder, Hō suddenly felt compassion for him. He had overreacted, he told himself uneasily; that wasn't how you treated a man who was only a nodding acquaintance.

'You've gone too far,' said the Ch'ungju woman. 'Where do you get the right to slap him and dress him down like that? To me you're both customers. And besides, you may think he's young, but he's old enough to produce children.' Her lips were pinched together, and she poured their drinks more roughly now.

'Young people need a dose of that now and then,' said Cho in an attempt to smooth over the situation.

'You've fallen for the young fellow, haven't you?' Hō asked the woman. 'Don't you know it's a sin to take advantage of a boy?'

The fuss died down. Hō, already emboldened, now felt like getting good and drunk. Every bowl of *makkōlli* he was given he tossed off almost at a gulp. As he began to mellow, his thoughts of the Ch'ungju woman were overshadowed by concern for Tongi. What was a guy in his position going to do after coming between them? What a foolish spectacle he had made of himself!

And for this reason, when Tongi rushed back a short time later, calling Hō frantically, Hō put down his bowl and ran outside in a flurry without thinking twice about it.

'Saengwōn, your donkey's running wild – it broke its tether.'

'Those little bastards must be teasing it,' muttered Hō.

Hō was of course concerned about his donkey, but he was moved even more by Tongi's thoughtfulness. As he ran after Tongi across the marketplace, his eyes became hot and moist.

'The little devils – there was nothing we could do,' said Tongi.

'Tormenting a donkey – they're going to catch hell from me.'

Hō had spent half his life with that animal, sleeping at the same country inns and walking from one market town to the next along roads awash with moonlight. And those twenty years had aged man and beast together. The animal's cropped mane bristled like his master's hair, and discharge

ran from his sleepy eyes, just as it did from Hō's. He would try as best he could to swish the flies away with his stumpy tail, now too short to reach even his legs. Time and again Hō had filed down the donkey's worn hooves and fitted him with new shoes. Eventually the hooves had stopped growing back, and it became useless trying to file them down. Blood now oozed between the hooves and the worn shoes. The donkey recognized his master's smell, and would greet Hō's arrival with a bray of delight and supplication.

Hō stroked the donkey's neck as if he were soothing a child. The animal's nostrils twitched, and then he whickered, sending spray from his nose in every direction. How Hō had suffered on account of this creature. It wouldn't be easy calming the sweaty, trembling donkey; those boys must have teased it without mercy. The animal's bridle had come loose, and his saddle had fallen off.

'Good-for-nothing little rascals!' Hō yelled. But most of the boys had run away. The remaining few had slunk off to a distance at Hō's shouting.

'We weren't teasing him,' cried one of them, a boy with a runny nose. 'He got an eyeful of Kim Ch'ōmji's mare and went crazy!'

'Will you listen to the way that little guy talks,' said Hō.

'When Kim Ch'ōmji took his mare away, this one went wild – kicking up dirt, foam all around his mouth, bucking like a crazy bull. He looked so funny – all we did was watch. Look at him down there and see for yourself,' shouted the boy, pointing to the underside of Hō's donkey and breaking into laughter.

Before Hō knew it, he was blushing. Feeling compelled to screen the donkey from view, he stepped in front of the animal's belly.

'Confounded animal! Still rutting at his age,' he muttered.

The derisive laughter flustered Hō for a moment, but then he gave chase to the boys, brandishing his whip.

'Catch us if you can! Hey, everybody, Lefty's gonna whip us!'

But when it came to running, Hō was no match for the young trouble-makers. That's right, old Lefty can't even catch a boy, thought Hō as he tossed the whip aside. Besides, the rice brew was working on him again, and he felt unusually hot inside.

'Let's get out of here,' said Cho. 'Once you start squabbling with

these market pests there's no end to it. They're worse than some of the adults.'

Cho and Tongi each saddled and began loading his animal. The sun had angled far towards the horizon.

In the two decades that Hō had been peddling dry goods at the rural markets, he had rarely skipped Pongp'yōng in his rounds. He sometimes went to Ch'ungju, Chech'ōn and neighbouring counties, and occasionally roamed farther afield to the Kyōngsang region. Otherwise, unless he went to a place such as Kangnūng to stock up on goods, he confined his rounds to P'yōngch'ang County. More regular than the moon, he tramped from one town to the next. He took pride in telling others that Ch'ōngju was his hometown, but he never seemed to go there. To Hō, home sweet home was the beautiful landscape along the roads that led him from one market town to the next. When he finally approached one of these towns after trudging half a day, the restive donkey would let out a resounding hee-haw. In particular, when they arrived around dusk, the flickering lights in the town – though a familiar scene by now – never failed to make Hō's heart quicken.

Hō had been a thrifty youth and had put away a bit of money. But then one year during the All Souls' Festival he had squandered and gambled, and in three days he had blown all of his savings. Only his extreme fondness for the donkey had restrained him from selling the animal as well. In the end, he had had no choice but to return to square one and begin making the rounds of the market towns all over again. 'It's a good thing I didn't sell you,' he had said with tears in his eyes, stroking the donkey's back as they fled the town. He had gone into debt, and saving money was now out of the question. And thus began a hand-to-mouth existence as he journeyed from one market to the next.

In the course of all his squandering, Hō had never managed to conquer a woman. The cold, heartless creatures – they have no use for me, he would think dejectedly. His only constant friend was the donkey.

Be that as it may, there had been one affair, and he would never forget it. His first and last – it was a most mysterious liaison. It had happened when he was young, when he had begun stopping at the Pongp'yōng market, and whenever he recalled it, he felt that his life had been worth living.

‘For the life of me, I still can’t figure it out,’ Hō said to no one in particular. ‘It was a moonlit night . . .’

This was the signal that Hō would begin yarning again that night. Being Hō’s friend, Cho had long since had an earful of what was to come. But he couldn’t exactly tell Hō he was sick of the story, and so Hō innocently started anew and rambled on as he pleased.

‘A story like this goes well with a moonlit night,’ said Hō with a glance towards Cho. Not that he felt apologetic towards his friend; rather, the moonlight had made him feel expansive.

The moon was a day or two past being full, and its light was soft and pleasant. Twenty miles of moonlit walking lay before them to Taehwa – two mountain passes, a stream crossing, hilly paths along endless fields. They were traversing a hillside. It was probably after midnight by now, and it was so deathly still the moon seemed to come alive right there in front of you, its breath almost palpable. Awash with moonlight, the bean plants and the drooping corn stalks were a shade greener. The hillside was covered with buckwheat coming into flower, and the sprinkling of white in the gentle moonlight was almost enough to take your breath away. The red stalks seemed delicate as a fragrance, and the donkeys appeared to have more life in their step.

The road narrowed, forcing the men to mount their animals and ride single file. The refreshing tinkle of the bells hanging from the donkeys’ necks flowed towards the buckwheat. Hō’s voice, coming from the front, wasn’t clearly audible to Tongi at the tail end, but Tongi had some pleasant memories of his own to keep him company.

‘It was market day in Pongp’yōng, and the moon was out, just like tonight. I’d taken this tiny little room with a dirt floor, and it was so muggy I couldn’t get to sleep. So I decided to go down and cool off in the stream. Pongp’yōng then was just like it is now – buckwheat everywhere you looked, and the white flowers coming right down to the stream. I could have stripped right there on the gravel, but the moon was so bright, I decided to use the watermill shed instead. Well, I want to tell you, strange things happen in this world. Suddenly, there I was in the shed, face to face with old man Song’s daughter – the town beauty. Was it fate that brought us together? You bet it was.’

Hō puffed on a cigarette, as if savouring his own words. The rich aroma of the purple smoke suffused the night air.

‘Of course she wasn’t waiting for me, but for that matter she didn’t have a boyfriend waiting for her, either. Actually, she was crying. And I had a hunch as to why. Old man Song was having a terrible time making ends meet, and the family was on the verge of selling out. Being a family matter, it was cause enough for her to worry too. They wanted to find a good husband for her, but she told me she would have died first. Now you tell me – is there anything that can get to a fellow more than the sight of a girl in tears? I sensed she was startled at first. But you know, girls tend to warm to you more easily when they’re worried, and it wasn’t long until – well, you know the rest. Thinking back now, it scares me how incredible that night was.’

‘And the next day she took off for Chech’ŏn or thereabouts – right?’ Cho prompted him.

‘By the next market day, the whole family had vanished. You should have heard the gossip in the market. Rumours were flying: the family’s best bet was to sell the girl off to a tavern, they were saying. God knows how many times I searched the Chech’ŏn marketplace for her. But there was no more sign of her than a chicken after dinner. My first night with her was my last. And that’s why I have a soft spot in my heart for Pongp’yŏng, and why I’ve spent half my life visiting the place. I’ll never forget it.’

‘You were a lucky man, Saengwŏn. Something like that doesn’t happen every day. You know, a lot of fellows get stuck with an ugly wife, they have kids, and the worries begin to pile up – you get sick of that after a while. On the other hand, being an itinerant peddler to the end of your days isn’t my idea of an easy life. So I’m going to call it quits after autumn. Thought I’d open up a little shop in a place like Taehwa and then have the family join me. Being on the road all the time wears a man out.’

‘Not me – unless I meet her again. I’ll be walking this here road, watching that moon, till the day I croak.’

The mountain path opened onto a wide road. Tongi came up from the rear, and the three donkeys walked abreast.

‘But look at you, Tongi,’ said Hō. ‘You’re still young – you’re in the prime

of life. It was stupid of me to act that way at the Ch'ungju woman's place. Don't hold it against me.'

'Don't mention it. I'm the one who feels silly. At this stage of my life, I shouldn't be worrying about girls. Night and day, it's my mother I think about.'

Downhearted because of Hō's story, Tongi spoke in a tone that was a shade subdued.

'When you mentioned my parents at the tavern, it made my heart ache. You see, I don't have a father. My mother's my only blood relation.'

'Did your father die?'

'I never had one.'

'Well, that's a new one.'

Hō and Cho burst into laughter.

'I'm ashamed to say it,' said Tongi with a serious expression, forced to explain himself, 'but it's the truth. My mother gave birth to me prematurely when they were in a village near Chech'ōn, and then her family kicked her out. I know it sounds strange, but that's why I've never seen my father's face, and I have no idea where he is.'

The men dismounted as they approached a pass, and fell silent while climbing the rough road. The donkeys frequently slipped. Hō was soon short of breath, and had to pause time and again to rest his legs. He felt his age every time he had to cross a pass. How he envied the young fellows like Tongi. Sweat began to stream down his back.

Just the other side of the pass, the road crossed a stream. The plank bridge had been washed out during the monsoon rains, so they would have to wade across. The men removed their loose summer trousers and tied them around their backs with their belts. Half naked, they presented a comical sight as they stepped briskly into the stream. They had been sweating a moment ago, but it was night-time and the water chilled them to the bone.

'Who the devil brought you up, then?' Hō asked Tongi.

'My mother did. She had no choice but to remarry, and she opened up a drinking house. But my stepfather was a hopeless drunk – a complete good-for-nothing. Ever since I was old enough to know what's what, he beat me. We didn't have a day's peace. And if Mother tried to stop him, she'd get kicked, hit, threatened with a knife. Our family was one big mess. And so I left home at eighteen, and I've been peddling ever since.'