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Three Stories by Munhak Tongne Writers

Bruce Fulton

Ŭn Hŭi-gyŏng, Kim Young-ha, and P'yŏn Hye-yŏng are three of the most distinctive fiction writers whose works have been published by Munhak Tongne, and three authors from whom much is expected in the new millennium. Ŭn Hŭi-gyŏng was born in Koch'ang, North Chŏlla Province, in 1959 and received undergraduate and graduate degrees in Korean literature from Sookmyung and Yonsei universities, respectively. Her first novel, *A Gift from a Bird* (Sae ŭi sŏnmul), published in 1996, was honored with the inaugural Munhak Tongne Literature Prize. In 1998 she received the Yi Sang Literature Prize for her story "My Wife's Boxes" (Anae ŭi sangja). She is represented in English translation in the journals *Koreana* and *Azalea* and in the anthology *Reading Korea* (Anvil Publishing, 2008).

Early on Ŭn drew notice for her light touch, her gently cynical sense of humor, and her penetrating insights into the psyches of the generation that came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. "Butterfly in the Dust" (Mŏnji sog ŭi nabi) was included in her 1997 story collection *Talking to a Stranger* (T'ain ege malgŏlgi). The mid-1990s global economic crisis requiring intervention by the IMF hit Korea particularly hard, and it is tempting to see, as background to the gender dynamics portrayed in this story, the increasingly straitened circumstances of the male constituency of South Korea's highly educated workforce.

Kim Young-ha (Kim Yŏng-ha; b. 1968) studied business administration at Yonsei University before launching a writing career in 1995 that to date has yielded almost a dozen short-fiction collections, novels, and travel diaries. When he was a boy, living near the Demilitarized Zone that divides the two Koreas--his father was stationed in the military there--he and his mother narrowly survived carbon monoxide poisoning (resulting from incomplete combustion of the coal briquettes commonly used to heat Korean dwellings at the time). The episode left Kim with no memories of his childhood, and he suggests that his writing career began in large part as an attempt to recover the lost narrative of his early life. In 2008 he gave up his teaching job at Seoul University of the Arts and he and his wife sold their apartment and left Korea for a series of residencies in Vancouver, Hong Kong, and (currently) New York City. He is represented in English

translation in a variety of journals, in the anthologies *Modern Korean Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 2005) and *Waxen Wings* (Yeong & Yeong, 2011), and in the novels *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (Harcourt, 2007) and *Your Republic Is Calling You* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

The broad scope of Kim's fictional world is evident in the novels he has published to date: *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (Na nün na rül p'agoehal kwöllli ka itta, 1996), about a suicide consultant who derives artistic inspiration from his clients' lives; *What's the Matter With Arang?* (Arang ün wae? 2001), an intertextual novel based on the tale of a Chosön period entertaining woman and an evil magistrate; *Black Flowers* (Kömün kkot, 2003), a historical novel about the first Korean immigrants in Mexico; *Your Republic Is Calling You* (Pit üi cheguk, 2006), whose protagonist is a North Korean spy who after 21 years of living undercover in South Korea is summoned back to his homeland; and *Quiz Show* (K'wijü shyo, 2007), a coming-of-age novel portraying the online culture of the young generation in present-day South Korea. "Lightning Rod" (P'iroech'im) was first published in the Fall 1998 issue of *Chakka Segye* (Writer's World).

P'yön Hye-yöng (b. 1972) studied creative writing at Seoul Institute of the Arts and Korean literature at Hanyang University before establishing herself on the South Korean literary scene in 2005 with the publication of *Mallow Gardens* (Aoi kadön), a collection of nine stories that are in turn surreal, violent, and menacing. Like contemporaries such as Ch'ön Un-yöng (whose "Needlework" [Panül, 2000] was a beacon to South Korean fiction of the new millennium), P'yön is a profoundly subversive writer who enjoys turning traditional gender relations on their head. Whereas the Korean literary establishment has long privileged fiction that addresses issues deemed relevant historically, politically, or culturally, her stories are image-driven, and the images are strong stuff indeed—body parts, body fluids, decay, fecundity, lushness. In a society whose contemporary history has been marked by the rationality and logic of authoritarian government and economic development, P'yön offers us a surreal, irrational world of chaos and confusion. In a traditionally patriarchal culture she tells her stories from the point of view of men who are subordinated to women and at the mercy of animals. Her second collection of fiction, *To the Kennels* (Sayukchang tchok üro, 2007), is milder in tone and subject matter but at the same time evinces the ability of a writer such as Shirley Jackson to take familiar particulars from everyday life and make them somehow unsettling. Characters in

her first novel, *Ash and Red* (Chae wa ppalgan, 2010), like those in the title story of *Mallow Gardens*, are quarantined because of a pandemic—yet another indication of a world in which individuals are losing control of their lives to global forces.

P'yŏn appears in English translation in the journals *Azalea* and *Acta Koreana*. “The Canning Factory” (T’ongjorim kongjang), which showcases her mordant wit and lean writing style, first appeared in the Summer 2009 issue of *Munhak Tongne* and was short-listed for the 2010 Yi Sang Literature Prize.