

National Translation Month Premiere:
An Excerpt from the Award-Winning Novel *One Left* by Kim Sum
Translated from the Korean by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton



In this installment, we're excited to share another NTM premiere: a moving and harrowing excerpt from the novel *One Left* by Kim Sum, translated from the Korean by the powerhouse duo Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. The novel tells the stories of Korean “comfort women,” in fact young girls (their average age was 16; some were as young as 12) forced into sexual servitude for the Japanese military forces during WWII, serving an estimated 15 to 50 men a day. Only 20,000 of these “comfort women” are thought to have survived and made it back to Korea after the war. And only a few told their horrific stories of trauma and abuse to author Kim Sum who researched and gathered testimonies for her novel *Han myǒng* (literally “one person,” in translation *One Left*). The first Korean novel devoted exclusively to the subject of the comfort women, it was published in Seoul, Korea, in 2016.

The translators Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton have received several awards and fellowships for their work, including two National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowships and a residency at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre, the first ever awarded for translators from any Asian language. For their translation of *One Left*, Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton received an America PEN Heim Translation Grant, only the second such award for a Korean project.

We hope you'll enjoy this terrific excerpt as much as we did. Let us know what you think using #TranslationMonth. Happy National Translation Month and happy reading!

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Context and Challenges of This Translation

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During World War Two, an estimated 200,000 Korean girls (their average age was 16; some were as young as 12) were forced into sexual servitude for the Japanese military forces, serving an estimated 15 to 50 men a day. Only 20,000 of these “comfort women” are thought to have survived and made it back to Korea after the war. But not until the early 1990s, almost fifty years after the war’s end, did these women begin to make public their background as sex slaves for the Japanese military, and to date only 238 have done so. As of October 2017, only 37 among the 238 self-declared Korean comfort women are still alive; their average age is 91. Korean author Kim Sum, noting the ever-declining number of former Korean comfort women, was inspired to research their lives through their testimony and other documentation. It is the lives of the long-lived survivors among these women that form the basis of her novel *Han myŏng* (literally “one person,” in our translation *One Left*). The first Korean novel devoted

exclusively to the subject of the comfort women, it was published in Seoul, Korea, in 2016.

The challenge in translating a fictional work involving trauma (Ju-Chan Fulton and I have translated several Korean fictional works dealing with trauma resulting from warfare, homicide, and torture) is to maintain adequate narrative distance from the often-horrific subject matter. Fortunately, author Kim Sum is able to establish narrative distance by situating the novel in the present and allowing us to share with the protagonist the memories of her years as a “comfort woman” that surface from what she sees and hears in her immediate environment, a bleak neighborhood of alleys emptied of residents who have moved out in anticipation of redevelopment. The scope of the narrative is thereby broadened so that it embraces not simply the experience of one person (*han myŏng*) but the experiences of all who have suffered trauma.

One Left

A novel by Kim Sum

Translated from the Korean by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton

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The one-story Western-style house she occupies is located in 15-*bŏnji*, the building and the plain, cement-covered yard occupying barely 15 *p'yŏng* of land. The faucet in the yard outside the bathroom sits in a housing just big enough for a washbasin.

Though it's her fifth year here, she's not the registered lease-holder—through no fault of her own she couldn't fill out the necessary change-of-address form. That's probably why she feels so fretful and uneasy there, as if she's sneaked into someone else's home.

There's a reason for all of this: the official lease-holders are her nephew's family in P'yŏngt'aek, and you can't report a new address if your name doesn't appear on the lease. The 15-*bŏnji* neighborhood is scheduled for redevelopment, and the residents have priority for lease-to-own rights to one of the new apartments that are going up. Knowing this, her nephew and his wife took out a lease on the house and filed the address-change form for themselves. From time to time she gets bills addressed to her nephew—for the residency tax and car-insurance premiums, for example—as well as mail from the National Health Service and the tax administration. This mail sits unopened in a neat pile until the next time he comes around.

The nephew is the son of her younger sister. She herself wasn't part of the family circle while he was growing up, which might be why he's never felt like a blood relation to her. And his blunt, offhand tendencies don't help. Which is why she felt both burdened and grateful when he offered her the house. She doesn't like accepting handouts, but when he practically got down on his knees and begged her, she gave in. Only then did he come clean about the priority right to the lease-to-own apartment and entreat her not to file the change-of-address when she moved in. That he was loath to register her as a resident was hurtful and upsetting, but she kept her feelings to herself. And she doesn't have to listen to the relatives jawing about a situation they're ignorant of to know what comes next: *What a nice guy he is to look after his poor, vagrant auntie when other people turn their back on their own parents!*

And it's obvious to her why she of all people has been chosen by her nephew to occupy the leased house: she's childless,ⁱ which will present one less problem in the future.

People have no clue where she's been or to what she's been subjected.ⁱⁱ

They can only assume that her marriageable years were spent drifting from one housemaid job to another. She never imposed on her family but could never bring herself to spill the truth even to her younger sisters, who considered her a burden and an eyesore: that she *hated* men; the mere sight of them made her shudder,ⁱⁱⁱ made her wish she had a gun with a silencer so she could exterminate them.^{iv}

Any talk of marrying her off sent her ballistic.^v

Every month or two the nephew stops by. Supposedly he works security at an apartment complex. Her heart goes out to him. Just think, a man aged sixty-plus who's never owned a home of his own, who has to take out a lease in a condemned neighborhood to obtain priority rights to the new housing that's going up.

In the government registry she's listed as living in multi-unit housing in Hwasŏng, near Suwŏn. The landlady there must have a new renter by now. And good riddance to she herself: she once overheard the landlady lamenting to another tenant that before long she'd have a corpse on her hands.

Recently she happened to learn that a landlord has the right to file for nullification of a

former tenant's official residency status if the tenant fails to submit the change-of-address form. She's afraid this has already happened—why, seven years later, would her landlady still keep her listed as a tenant?

What's going to happen when the demolition starts? She wants to ask her nephew this but tells herself she shouldn't. It won't be long now, but still she takes the broom and the rag to the house morning and evening, paying special attention to the windows and doorways. The house is old and if she slacks off in her cleaning, it shows.

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She stops at the gate to look back at the one-bedroom house and finds herself wondering if a child was ever born there. Or—considering all the families who at one time in their lives had to live crammed together in a single room--if an extended family once lived there.

Every time she passes through the gate she feels she's leaving forever. Especially a few days earlier, when she wasn't able to lock the gate on her way out, an experience that left her churning inside. It wasn't her fault, the lock was rusty, but still she felt as if she'd been driven from the house, and all she could do was squat miserably outside the gate.

The alley is thick with shadow and layered with a desolate silence. The house is the only one in the alley that's still occupied. You'd think that *someone* should be living in the two-story Western-style house at the far end of the alley, but it too is vacant.

In just two or three years there's been a drastic increase in the number of empty dwellings in 15-*bōnji*. The only people remaining are, like her, those whose circumstances prevent them from leaving.

The alley gives onto another alley. This alley too is deathly still—it seems the last remaining occupants are gone.

For twenty minutes she wanders these alleys and not a person does she meet. Leaving her feeling that if she were to encounter someone she'll want to give that person all of herself—her heart, liver, kidneys, even her eyes. But still she sees no one.

On her way down an alley that's steep as a slide she stops and looks intently at her feet.

She feels as if her feet are clad with dead magpies instead of shoes.

Even when she's convinced her shoes haven't turned to magpies, she can't remove her gaze from them. She's afraid that if she does, they will.

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The woman who does alterations is out. Her shop and the living space behind it add up to maybe three *p'yōng* and are packed with what she needs to make her living: mother-of-pearl wardrobe trunk and dressing table, television, dining table for two, sewing machine, clothes-drying rack, chest with three drawers, electric fan. The dining table is strewn with pill bottles alongside a rice cooker. The drying rack is strung with handkerchiefs and underwear, and the floor beneath is littered with a glasses case, a roll of toilet tissue, cookie snack-packs, and such. This is where the woman eats, sleeps, and does finish work, attaching zippers to clothing and cords to curtaining.

Beneath the sewing machine is a lace-bedecked pink seat cushion with a white dog curled up on it. The dog is some thirteen years old but small enough that you might mistake it for a puppy that's just been weaned.

The dog's been staring at her since she arrived, and now it makes an effort to rise but quickly curls up again. To her it seems more human than animal—probably the look. She marvels at how an animal is capable of producing a human look. Maybe it's only natural when an animal lives with a person, sharing the good times and the bad, the pleasure as well as the pain?

The dog's expression is so perfectly human it unsettles her. And its hair loss and the

scabby eruptions on its skin are hideous.

She knows that over the years this dog has produced some fifty puppies. Every time its mistress gathers it in her arms and goes off on a spiel about its fecundity, she finds herself shaking her head. How could the little thing produce fifty puppies?

The woman has the dog artificially inseminated and sells the resulting litter at the pet market. The proceeds are nothing to sneeze at, the woman likes to say—after all it's a purebred, and a preferred breed at the pet market. Whenever the dog is due, the woman anesthetizes it, makes an incision in its belly, and delivers the puppies herself before stitching the dog back up. That way she can account for every last one of the puppies. The dog's belly is an ugly belt of stitch marks, flesh abrading flesh.

She's about to leave but thinks better of it and eases herself down on the threshold. Reading her behavior, the dog comes down from the seat cushion, and the next thing she knows it's inching toward her, dragging its hind legs and rump. It settles close by, and now it's licking the hand that grips the threshold for support. It's a weird, tickling sensation and she closes her hand into a tight fist, but the dog takes no notice and licks for dear life.

She's discomfited by the devotion of this dog that's smaller than her foot, and at the same time feels sorry for it.

"Now stop that...."

She just can't understand it—the dog is practically basting her fingers with its tongue. Not once has she given the dog a good petting. It's nice the way it always welcomes her with a wag of its tail, but the way it mimics a human expression weighs heavily on her mind.

The alteration shop woman has returned. She watches her enter the shop but continues to let the dog lick her hand to its heart's content.

"The little darling, isn't she lovable," the woman says casually.

"She's a sweetie, all right," she says, her face betraying embarrassment as she pulls her hand back.

"Then maybe you'd like her for a pet?"

"Me?"

"She eats about as much as a bird and she's long since potty-trained."

"But why... would you want to give her away?"

"I'd just as soon get rid of her if there's someone who wants her."

She knows that this woman doesn't sugar-coat her words, whether she's talking about herself or others, but doesn't beat around the bush either.

"You must be so attached to her, you've had her since she was a puppy—how could you give her to someone—"

"There comes a time when you have to let your kids go, why should it be any different with a dog?"

She's pretty much figured out the woman's scheme—now that the dog is too old to produce puppies she wants to pass it on.

The woman's attitude toward the dog has thrown her into confusion. It's heartless the way the woman has the dog artificially inseminated whenever she wants it to turn out more puppies, but on the other hand she's terribly devoted to it—it's as if the dog is her own offspring. Just a few days ago the woman was for the longest time simmering a pollack head to feed it. She's not sure which of these approaches reflects how the woman really feels about the dog. Maybe they both do—but how could these different mind-sets, like the two poles of a magnet, co-exist within the same person?

Was it forty years the woman said she'd been living in 15-*bōnji*? She said she'd raised her three boys all by herself after her husband, a fireman, had died of cirrhosis of the liver. And when her boys were going through their growth spurt she was up past midnight at her sewing machine, then up again by five in the morning to make two lunchboxes apiece for their long day

of school and study. No way would she want to relive that period, the woman once declared, before adding that it was nevertheless a period worth living.

She finds her gaze wandering beneath the sewing machine. Before they've noticed, the dog is once again curled up on the seat cushion.

The woman goes to the refrigerator and returns with two glasses of milk, one of which she places in front of her. Seeing her merely staring at the milk, the woman picks up the glass and offers it to her.

"I'm sorry, milk doesn't agree with me..."

She just can't bring herself to say that it reminds her of semen.^{vi}

He told her to swallow his semen.^{vii} When she protested, the soldier unsheathed the knife from his waistband and stabbed the tatami.

The girls had to do what the soldiers told them. Soldiers had been known to shoot girls who didn't. Shoot them down below. As if they'd forgotten that where the muzzle was sighting in on was the very space where all of humanity had been fashioned.

One day a Japanese officer shot Myōngsuk *ōnni* down below. Because she'd refused, even after being beaten. Beaten unconscious, she continued to refuse after she came to. The bullet passed through her uterus. It didn't kill her but it left her like a rotten pumpkin down there.^{viii}

Eating shit would be better than this. She grimaced as she swallowed the fluid.^{ix}

And she can't eat squid. Because the suction cups remind her of the mounded sores that erupted in her groin when she came down with syphilis. When the sores erupted even her eyes would start itching. *Itching so badly she felt like poking her eyes with a needle.*^x

Back out in the alley she wanders around.

"Why me?" she murmurs.

She thinks she knows why the woman's attitude toward the dog is beyond confusing, is painful to her even. It reminds her of *haha*, the woman who ran the comfort station.

Haha gave the girls Japanese names and provided them with food and clothing. She also distributed *jimigami*—coarse, dark-colored toilet tissue^{xi}—as well as olive green soap, toothbrushes, tooth powder, gauze menstrual pads, and towels. And a navy blue sleeveless dress that looked like a rice sack.

When the girls didn't pay attention *haha* would tell on them to her truck driver husband, the man who had delivered them from the Harbin train station. He had been in the army and the girls called him *otosan*—which, she had learned from Kūmbok *ōnni*, was Japanese for "father." On the wall of the kitchen, where the girls took their meals, was a photo of *otosan* in a military uniform sporting two dots that you might almost take for stars.^{xii} While the girls sat around the plywood dining table taking their meal, *haha* and her family ate amongst themselves. The girls took in the aromas of pike mackerel and beef soup. Those items didn't appear on their table, which bore only watery gruel and pickled radish.

Haha and her family lived in a hut apart from the comfort station. *Otosan* spent his days in a room near the entrance to the station where, armed with sword and pistol, he kept watch over the girls. To keep them from escaping he strung electric wire around the compound.

When she thinks of *haha*'s two daughters a strange thought occurs to her: those little girls also referred to *haha* as *haha*.

Come to think of it, the alteration shop woman also tried to hand off her dog to the woman who runs the Seoul Beauty Parlor. This woman had flat out said no, she was born in the year of the tiger and the poor dog would be scared shitless in her presence. The beauty parlor woman is the

sort who believes that marriage compatibility is a matter of fate, and she understood her husband's vagabond nature—he was an itinerant construction worker—as an inevitable result of their conflicting personalities, which made it necessary for them to live apart from each other if their marriage was to survive. She herself found it dubious that a husband and wife doomed with combative personalities were so strongly attracted to each other that they could marry and have two children. If they were in fact bad news for each other, shouldn't they have cut their losses and run off in opposite directions before they tied the knot?

She doesn't know if the determination of a person's fate is a matter of the alignment of the stars, temperament, or the will of the gods. Perhaps it's a combination of all three?

She's not sure if the gods exist, but there are times she feels them. When she sees the first light of dawn through the milky glass of her window, when a flock of sparrows take flight from the woods, when she bites into a sweet, juicy peach.... Now that she's figured out it's the gods she senses, she's surprised at how often she's felt them at work. The first time she saw bellflowers she felt the gods.

And at the same time she feels fright.

And even though she's not sure the gods exist, you won't find her picking up fruit that's fallen from someone else's tree, for fear that one of the gods might see her. And you won't hear her curse another, even in an undertone, for fear a god might hear. Indeed, she thinks that perhaps she's more afraid of the gods than the people who trust in their existence.

But the real reason she's turned down the woman's offer of her dog is this: what if she breathes her last before the dog lives out its days?

People are always urging her to keep a dog or a cat; after all, she doesn't have a husband or children. The elderly woman who took her in as a housekeeper for six years went so far as to say she had the look of a person who could revive any living thing. This after seeing her minister to house plants that had shriveled and seemingly died at the hands of the daughter-in-law but now, miracle of miracles, were blooming anew! This gift was enough, said the mistress, to revive a person on death's doorstep. She herself, though, believed that her revival of the houseplants resulted not from a god-given gift but from her always being a whirlwind of activity. Her success with the plants owed to feeding them with water used for rinsing the rice, finding the sunniest place to put them, and watching morning, noon, and night for any sign of withering.

Even if she was convinced that at age ninety-three she would outlive the dog, she would refuse it anyway. For she's not sure she can prevent a pet from getting sick and dying.

She does have Nabi, who likes to hunt and then bring her the trophies. And as much as she wishes Nabi wouldn't do that, her greater hope is that one day the cat won't return from its hunting expedition. At the same time, if it's gone even four days she feels anxious. She wonders how old the cat is. And if it ever had another master. And if so, if that person abandoned it.

She's afraid that someday Nabi will bring home a live magpie and drop it at her feet.

And the next time a dead girl.

But maybe the gods too would consider me dirty.

*

The comfort station in Manchuria was a living hell. Even if you wanted to hang yourself, there wasn't a single tree fit for the purpose. Out on the plains there were only scrub oaks and a scattering of husk-like shrubs poking out of the ground. You had to go high up in the hills to find trees worthy of the name. Four long days of scrambling across the highest of the high hills would get you to Soviet land.

And so the girls would cut themselves and bleed to death while high on opium. Knowing that if they cut a finger and sucked long enough to get the blood flowing, the opium would put

them to sleep and they'd never wake up.^{xiii} Kisuk *ōnni* had died like that, her blood-caked teeth looking like pomegranate kernels.

Back in her ancestral home of Miryang, Kisuk *ōnni* had worked at a cotton-gin operation run by the Japanese. You put the cotton bolls from the field into the gin and it separated the cotton from the seeds. Kisuk *ōnni* said she had seen a man get dragged into the machine by his hair.^{xiv}

"He was a distant relative," Kisuk *ōnni* had said, "and his daughter saw it too. What could any of us do except jump up and down and scream.... She was the same age as me and she didn't have a proper name and so we called her Monnani, the ugly one. Monnani went off before I did. After what happened to her father, she was the only one in the family who could bring money in.... She said she was going to work in a munitions factory in Japan.... I can still visualize that accident, it was so real, so imagine what it was like for her. It was the hair that got caught...just a few strands of it...and as soon as we said *uh-oh* his head was sucked in...."

The morning Kisuk *ōnni* died she got an injection of opium from *otosan* and went out to the yard and started dancing. She pulled at the sleeve of the kimono the scarecrow was wearing, so that it looked like she was dancing along with the scarecrow. *Haha* called this scarecrow Haruka. Haruka's face was redder than it was the day the girls arrived at the comfort station. Supposedly *haha* daubed it with blood every night. None of the girls saw her doing this, but Haruka's face got redder by the day. Unlike the faces of the girls, which turned a sickly yellow or black.

After what happened to Kisuk *ōnni*, she dreamed she was slinking down the hallway of the comfort station. Calling to Kisuk *ōnni*, telling her it was time for breakfast. *Haha* provided only two meals a day, so if you missed breakfast you either went hungry all day or got by on hardtack from the soldiers. The girls often missed breakfast when officers arrived late at night.^{xv} In her dream she just couldn't find Kisuk *ōnni*'s room—the names of the girls had all been removed from the doors.

Haha had written name tags for the girls and posted them on the doors. Umeko, Kiyoko, Fumiko, Eiko, Kinoo, Asako.... The girls who came down with gonorrhea or syphilis had their name tags turned inside out and the soldiers didn't line up outside their doors.

The name tags were made of wood and were hung lengthwise. They were about the size of a container for spoon and chopsticks and resembled a memorial plaque bearing the name of the deceased. Which made her feel as if the names written on them were those of the girls who had died rather than the ones still alive.

The girls had been told they'd be issued new rubber footwear and be fed full portions of rice, not the chaffy stuff.^{xvi} They had no idea that the place they went to upon hearing these promises was a living hell.

And in this living hell the girls were flogged with *soekkudae*,^{xvii} whips with metal handles; beaten with red-hot fire pokers^{xviii} or with metal bars^{xix}; hit with the flat of a sword; or kicked indiscriminately.^{xx} *And they stuck red-hot metal rods into the girls' vaginas. The rods came out with charred flesh stuck to them.*^{xxi}

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She's in an alley where no one lives. She stops and looks at all the empty dwellings. They're of every size and shape imaginable. One moment she'll see a house shut tight, windows and all, the next moment a house with its gate open wide onto the alley. There are houses with shattered windows, the shards of glass strewn in the alley, and houses with overflowing piles of trash and abandoned furniture.

If it was her, she'd want to make sure she'd shut all the doors and windows before vacating.

Some places it's hard to tell whether they're vacant or inhabited. Somehow the house she occupies strikes her the same way.

She worries about the empty houses in 15-*bōnji*, thinking of them as birds and hoping they'll fly off before the wrecking crews and the excavators arrive.

There were houses on the Manchurian plains. They come to mind now, haze-like--dwellings appearing in the distance from the cargo truck that picked them up in Harbin. Houses made of boards slapped together, houses with brushwood fences, sooty structures that looked more like fireboxes than homes. Houses resembling migratory birds taking a respite from their endless journey to feed on bugs and stray grain.

When the plains became bare, with neither house nor tree in sight, Haegūm mumbled anxiously, "I wonder how far it is to the silk factory."

The truck was rattling terribly, but her face and eyes showed that Haegūm herself was rattled. *We were too young, we didn't know a thing*; they never doubted^{xxii} how it came to be that they were all led to believe they were going to different factories. She herself didn't care if it was a factory that made thread, silk, or needles, if it was a good or a bad place to work, she just wished they would get there.

There were in fact girls who had gone to factories to make money. Miok *ōnni* had left school in the sixth grade at the urging of her principal and joined the Workers Service Corps. She took the streetcar to Kyōngsōng Station and with other girls boarded a train for Pusan. Young as she was, she thought only that she was off on a trip to some distant place.^{xxiii} At Pusan she boarded a shuttle ferry named *Kamome*, which means "seagull," to Shimonoseki, where she was loaded onto a truck and taken to a munitions factory in Toyama Prefecture that made cartridges for assault rifles. Her work table was so high she had to stand on a chest to do her work. One area of the factory was stacked with brassware confiscated from Korea, to be melted down and made into weaponry. Not once was Miok *ōnni* compensated during the time she worked at this factory.^{xxiv}

At the comfort station Kisuk *ōnni*, hearing that Miok *ōnni* had been at a munitions factory in Japan, asked, "You must know Monanni, then?"

"Monanni?"

"Well, Monanni said she was going to work at a munitions factory."

"There wasn't anyone named Monanni where I worked."

"That's strange...."

When Kisuk *ōnni* cocked her head dubiously, Miok *ōnni* followed up with, "Where was this Monanni from?"

"Miryang."

"We had a lot of girls from Chinju and Masan but none that I know of from Miryang."

"At the factory where I worked," said Ch'unhūi *ōnni*, "there were a lot of girls from Chōlla."

Ch'unhūi *ōnni* had worked at a clothing factory. From eight in the morning to seven in the evening she did laundry, cleaned up, and made clothes. At that factory were women in their thirties who had left their children back in the home village so they could go out to make money.

"The dinner they fed us was so measly you could practically count the grains of rice. And until dinner all they gave us was three lumps of rice cake that was more like bean cake. I used to wrap it in cloth and stick it in my waistband, then eat it later by myself—along with all the lice that lived there, no doubt. Before I got here I sent a telegram home asking my family to send me salt and beans...."

After several months at the clothing factory some fifteen of the girls were summoned, put on a truck, and taken away. They ended up in a large room. Japanese soldiers arrived and the girls found themselves being taken one at a time to smaller rooms. After that the girls, but only

the younger ones, were scheduled by the day—on Tuesday the Tuesday girls went out to the smaller rooms, on Wednesday the Wednesday girls went out, and so on.

The days the girls didn't have to go out to serve the soldiers were days of freedom.^{xxv}

"This MP asked me how old I was," said Ch'unhüi *ōnni*. "I guess because my face is kind of round like a baby's... anyway I told him I was thirteen and he went 'Wow' and laughed."

Ch'unhüi *ōnni* was fifteen when she arrived at the Manchuria comfort station. Her round baby face, as she called it, became sunken and pointed like a trowel. From her very first day she was desperate to escape. She made a nuisance of herself playing sick to *haha*, anything to reduce the quota of soldiers she had to take. The other girls went about with mouths pursed like goldfish, going through the motions even when singing "Kimigayo," the Japanese national anthem, and reciting the Rescript for Loyal Citizens.

Before breakfast the girls gathered on the lawn outside the comfort station. Standing immobile facing the Japanese flag, with loud voices they sang the anthem and recited the rescript.

It was summer and from early in the morning the air reeked because of the outhouses. The girls staggered out onto the lawn with dazed expressions, as if addled by nightmares, and stood watching the flag. The sunlight landing on the nape of Haegüm's neck felt prickly. She stood somnolent, her head down. Blowflies just hatched in the outhouses buzzed among the girls. All summer long the outhouses spawned maggots, mosquitoes, and blowflies. Ch'unhüi *ōnni* was scratching her face, which was patchy from malnourishment, and half mumbling, half cursing. Hanok *ōnni* was grabbing at her armpits. The lice were a constant presence and had found a home there as well.

She moved next to Yōnsun. "What happened?"

In the wee hours of the morning she had heard Yōnsun scream. And then a door being kicked in. Feet running down the hall. *Otosan* and a soldier tussling. It had gone on for quite some time.

*Thousands of years of happy reign be thine;
Rule on, my lord, till what are pebbles now
By age united to mighty rocks shall grow
Whose venerable sides the moss doth line.*

The girls started singing and she and Yōnsun joined in. Suddenly Yōnsun plopped down, yellowish pus streaming from between her thighs. A blowfly came to rest on her open, blackened mouth.

Even as the girls sang in praise of the emperor and pledged their undying loyalty as citizens of the empire, the lice were feeding on their blood.

Today the memories of the comfort station in Manchuria are especially vivid. The building had block walls overlaid with plywood and was filled with rooms flanking the bamboo-straight hallways. The slipshod wooden floors of the hallways creaked loudly day and night. At the end of one of the hallways was the kitchen; it had a dirt floor and a Chinese-style firebox for cooking. Atop one of the board shelves the girls' rice bowls were stacked like a tower, round bowls made of nickel. When the rats were active *haha* put out pieces of cardboard bearing a glue-like substance. *Haha* didn't like people coming and going from the kitchen, and the only time the girls were allowed in was when they came for water. Whenever she went to the kitchen for water and saw the rats stuck fast by their feet or tail to the cardboard she felt a close kinship with them. Once she found a couple of baby rats stuck to the cardboard; the mother rat was looking on, fire in her eyes.

The yard in front of the comfort station was bare earth except for a few clumps of tangled

grass. A stream went past the yard out back. A channel had been carved for the stream, and where the water pooled, an area for washing up had been curtained off with thick sheets the color of military fatigues. Fed by the stream water, half a dozen lengths of hose resembling fat worms stuck out of the ground, each one topped by a ladle-like shower head.^{xxvi}

The three plywood outhouses had locks made of a yellow metal. *Haha* gave the keys to the girls, in effect making the outhouses off limits to the soldiers. Otherwise the pits would be overloaded in no time and stink to high heaven. The only time the girls gave out the keys was to the officers who arrived at night.^{xxvii}

Each of the girls' rooms had an opening set ridiculously high in the wall. What's more, the window was curtained with a thick cotton drape that fell nearly to the floor, so even during daytime the rooms were dark as caves.

On average the rooms were about one and half *p'yōng* in area. There were rooms slightly smaller and rooms slightly larger. When new girls arrived at the comfort station *haha* would hang a blanket in the larger rooms, partitioning them in two.

When she sees the upper windows of the buildings bordering the alleys she can't help but relate them to the windows in the rooms of the comfort station. Even the tallest girls were barely head-high to the windowsill.

*

There she is again.

She recalls the first time she encountered this girl. She saw her approaching from the far end of the alley and startled. *Punsōn, back from the dead!* With her cropped hair and eyes as round as a bird's the girl definitely resembled Punsōn.

Punsōn, taken from the cotton fields where she worked, Punsōn calling out *It hurts, it hurts*,^{xxviii} every waking moment at the comfort station.

When Punsōn's infection down below made it difficult for her to walk, *haha* cut into the pus-filled flesh with her dagger. After squeezing out the pus she stuck a cotton ball coated with a white powder to the area.

There was a Japanese officer, ready for action, who said to Punsōn, "Let's have some fun." But she didn't understand Japanese and just stood there. Whereupon the officer grabbed her and threw her to the ground.

The girl is wearing a backpack and squatting at the base of the wall, next to a crack that looks like a slash mark. She hasn't seen her for a few months and assumed the girl had moved.

It's a miracle the girl is still here in 15-*bōnji*. There are precious few children left. When she moved in she could hear children's voices from time to time, but by now practically all the families with children have moved. Growing up in 15-*bōnji* has become bleak and anarchic. Maybe that's why this girl strikes her as the one girl left not only in 15-*bōnji* but in the whole world.

Today as always the girl is by herself. She's never seen the girl with friends.

The girl wears a small yellow dress that stretches tightly across her chest and leaves her thighs exposed. Because she's squatting, the hem of her dress is rolled up to her hips, and her panties are in and out of view. Maybe the girl doesn't have a mother? Or maybe the mother is off to work and leaves the girl to her own devices? If she were the girl's mom she wouldn't be letting her wander the alleys of 15-*bōnji*. The girl doesn't look like she's beyond the age where she'd be playing the baby with her mom, but there's definitely something more girlish than baby-like about her.

With half a mind to pull the girl's dress down she approaches gingerly. And yet the girl is already on guard and the next moment the vigilance has changed to hostility.

Stopping to read the girl's intentions, she catches sight of an object resting in the hand

that lies limp against the pavement. Her mouth widens as she gawks at it.

“A mask—something you made at school....”

Not a wooden mask but a mask made of paper pulp. Examining the mask, she cocks her head inquisitively. The mask has eyes and a nose but no mouth.

The girl gets up and sticks out the mask toward her. “Try it on.”

She flinches at the girl’s voice, which to her ears is obnoxiously loud.

“Try it on,” says the girl, fretful now.

Don’t tell me she made that mask just for me?

It’s not a huge request but she doesn’t feel right about it. There’s no mouth, the entire surface is purple, it gives her the creeps.

It’s only a mask made of paper pulp but somehow she feels it would stick to her face and she wouldn’t be able to get it off. She doesn’t know how many days she has left in this world, but she would have to live out those days with this mask stuck to her face. And even when she’s dead and buried and her face has rotted away, the mask would remain intact, wandering underground.

“I told you to try it on!” Now it’s an order.

She knows she can’t win and takes the mask.

A sly, mischievous expression comes over the girl’s face, which is oddly contorted. But the next instant it looks old and weary, as if the girl has experienced every conflict life can throw at her.

She tries to avoid looking at the girl’s face as she observes the mask she’s holding. It has a garish shine from its coating of paint and varnish. The gleam gives the mask a peculiar expression that she who is human cannot mimic.

Only after inspecting the alley to make sure no one is watching the two of them does she bring the mask to her face. She positions it this way and that so her eyes can see through the holes, then realizes the holes and her eyes are not equidistant and the mask won’t fit. One eye might but then the other one won’t.

Before she’s finished she hears the girl’s shrill laughter. Then it seems to grow distant, and suddenly it’s gone. Only then does she remove the mask and look about the alley; the girl is nowhere to be seen.

“Hey, sweetie, you need to take your mask....”

Her fear-ridden voice rings hollow in the alley.

Is the mask a gift? A gift of the gods, sent by way of the girl? The mask using the girl as a medium, like the dead magpie used the cat as a medium?

She finds the mask more terrifying than the magpie. She can’t return dead magpies whence they came, but she would like to return the mask.

But she doesn’t know where the girl lives. Once she secretly followed the girl in an attempt to find out. It was a game of hide and seek, the girl leading her on a circuitous trip through the alleys, only to vanish in the blink of an eye.

How old could the girl be? Ten? Eleven? Twelve? Thirteen? Every time she goes out the gate of the house she occupies, she decides that if she sees the girl in the alleys she’ll ask --but she always forgets.

The girl couldn’t have reached age thirteen yet. She still can’t believe that’s how old she herself was when she was taken away back then.

One night at the comfort station a drunken officer took his dagger and made a cut in her privates. She was barely thirteen and her underdeveloped genitalia wouldn’t admit him.^{xxix}

Could the last one be Aesun? Aesun with her swarthy face and thin eyelids drank the potassium permanganate solution she was supposed to dilute with water to clean her privates. Fortunately Kūmbok *ōnni* found her and made her throw up. But the solution left her throat raw.^{xxx} And her

vocal cords too, so that she sounded like a parrot when she spoke.

The tiniest drop of this solution turned water red, a little more made it black. Fatal if swallowed, it was used for washing the girls' privates.^{xxx}

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Wandering in search of the girl in the yellow dress, she finds herself in front of the mini-mart. The man who runs it is combing his wife's hair. Eyes closed, the wife entrusts herself to him, and it's like he's taken her in his embrace the way he supports her from behind. Even at a distance she can almost feel the trembling hand holding the orange, hatchet-shaped comb. *How marvelous—he's got the palsy and there he is combing her hair!* Combing as if it's the only task left for him in this world.

The wife is paralyzed from the waist down and keeps to the living quarters at the back of the shop, lying sideways and facing out. From there she does checkout for the customers and their purchases. The alteration shop woman finds her unsightly and won't buy so much as a pack of gum there. Even though she knows the mart woman would have an awful time hoisting herself to a sitting position.

Maybe they're having the time of their life, this couple. Maybe it's so they can savor this blessing for as long as possible that he takes the longest time combing her hair.

As far as she knows, he used to work at City Hall, was the envy of all, but gambled away a fortune and the family was ruined. To pay off his gambling debts he went to work at a fish farm on a coastal island and there he had a stroke. The alteration woman blames the wife's disability on the husband. *I mean, think about it*, she'll say. After the husband had his stroke the wife did this, that, and the other thing to pay off what remained of his debt, and then one day she slipped on a sheet of ice and suffered a spinal cord injury. Three surgeries later she still couldn't stand, and that's when the man took on the mini-mart.

There, he did it, he's dropped the comb. Standing still as a statue, she waits for him to pick it up.

*

Her feet have brought her to an alley she doesn't normally visit. 15-*bŏnji* is a labyrinth of interlocking alleys with no apparent logic to the layout. Some of the alleys seem endless, others are short and blunted, and just when you're getting used to them forking in two or even three you run into a dead end. And then there are the alleys that look like roller coasters.

And now guess what? It's the old man. Who's never by himself, who always has his son in tow. The son is well over fifty but functions at the level of a five- or six-year-old due to a birth defect. You would never believe the two of them are father and son. The father with his knotty chin and wavy hair is slight and appears to be bending over to get a closer look at the world, whereas the son is gigantic like a wrestler, his eyebrows thick and his features well defined.

She's often witnessed the father cajoling the massive son after he's stopped dead in his tracks in the alley. But she's never seen him snarling and threatening the son or venting his fury on him.

According to the Seoul Beauty Parlor woman, the old man is absolutely devoted to the son. Decades ago he was visited by social workers who suggested sending the son to a facility; the old man grabbed a kitchen knife and all hell broke loose. Since then no one has dared bring up the issue with him.

What if I run into them? This is her constant concern, even though it's this father and son whom she encounters most frequently among the denizens of 15-*bŏnji*. They've never once acknowledged her, much less harassed her, but her heart goes into overdrive at the sight of them.

She's hit by a urine stink but can't tell if it's coming from them or from the alley.

The old man roams 15-*bŏnji* scavenging electric wire from the deserted homes, then

strips out the copper and sells it to the junk dealer. The old man's house is down the hill from the house where she lives, separated by two alleys, its back yard visible beyond the collapsed wall. The yard is a war zone of bundles of electric wire and copper.

She wonders how he strips the copper from the wire. *Like peeling blood vessels from a dead animal?*

Oh no! There it is, the orange onion sack. And inside it a kitten.

It's the old man's side job. He's a merciless hunter of kittens in 15-*bŏnji* and he sells them at the market. No one raises a stink about it—the kittens are strays bred among strays. According to the beauty parlor woman he gets 5000 *wŏn* per kitten—at the very least.

Four months ago she was roaming the alleys like today when she came across the old man at work: his hand shaped like a bird's foot darting out to grab a kitten around the neck, then stuffing it into the orange onion bag as the terrified creature clawed at the air, then hanging the elongated bag from the gate of the nearest of the vacated houses. The ideal snare, that mesh bag.

All the while, the adult son looked on meekly like a grade schooler in detention. She feels somehow as if the entire process is being imprinted step by step on his brain.

This time the old man hangs the bag with the kitten from a utility pole and strides off down the alley.

Whether from exhaustion or resignation the kitten in the bag is dead still, not thrashing about, not yowling. On the one hand it would seem fortunate if the kitten has early on accepted its fate, but at the same time she's nagged by a thought: judging from the bones jutting against its hide, it wasn't nursed much.

If 15-*bŏnji* were a backwoods hollow instead of a redevelopment zone where cats run free, would the old man be hunting rabbits, pheasants, or boar?

She also wonders what he'll buy with the 5000 *wŏn* he gets for a kitten? Rice, eggs, salt, ramen, milk, potatoes, flour?

At the mini-mart 5000 *wŏn* will buy a tray of eggs. About a month ago she saw him purchase a tray of eggs there.

Or maybe he uses that money to pay for his electricity, his water, his gas?

Sensing her presence, the kitten releases a feeble but persistent meow. Her face hardens as she looks about the alley. No one there but her and the kitten.

The bag is within reach if she gets up on tiptoe. But she dares not retrieve the bag and free the kitten. She no longer has the heart.

It's not that she lacks mercy but rather she's too old to be dispensing it. This is how she rationalizes it, but still she's swept by guilt. She tries to convince herself that no harm's been done, and yet she feels something wicked has happened.

As soon as the kitten was bagged it belonged to the old man.

Just like the girls became the property of a *haha*, *oksan*, *obasan*, or *otosan* after they were snatched and taken away while weeding the field,^{xxxii} picking cotton,^{xxxiii} fetching water from the village well,^{xxxiv} returning home from washing laundry in the stream,^{xxxv} heading to school,^{xxxvi} or tending to their ailing father.^{xxxvii}

Back in the beginning, was that how people staked out the virgin land? And the chestnut trees, the persimmon trees, and the other trees that bear nuts and fruit? And the streams? And the dogs, the goats, the pigs, and the other pets and livestock?

At the Manchuria comfort station the girls were livestock, no different from chickens or

goats. If the girls didn't obey or were caught trying to escape, *otosan* would lead them around by a leather leash looped about their neck.^{xxxviii}

ⁱYi Yongsu: *Ibid.*, vol. 1.

ⁱⁱYun Turi: *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱBxx (pseudonym; b. 1927): *Tŭllinayo?*

^{iv}Kim Ch'unhŭi: *Kangje ro kkŭllyŏgan Chosŏnin kun wianbu tŭl*, vol. 2.

^vBxx (pseudonym; b. 1927): *Tŭllinayo?*

^{vi}Yun Turi: *Kangje ro kkŭllyŏgan Chosŏnin kun wianbu tŭl*, vol. 1.

^{vii}Hwang Kŭmju: *Ilje kangjŏmgi*.

^{viii}Hwang Kŭmju: *Kiŏg ŭro tashi ssŭnŭn yŏksa*; Yun Sunman: *Kiŏg ŭro tashi ssŭnŭn yŏksa*.

^{ix}Hwang Kŭmju: *Kiŏg ŭro tashi ssŭnŭn yŏksa*.

^xKim Yŏngja: *Ibid.*

^{xi}Kim Ŭnjin: *Kangje ro kkŭllyŏgan Chosŏnin kun wianbu tŭl*, vol. 2.

^{xii}Mun Okchu: *Ibid.*, vol. 1.

^{xiii}Chang Chŏmdol: *Yŏksa rŭl mandŭnŭn iyagi*.

^{xiv}Kim Ch'unhŭi: *Kangje ro kkŭllyŏgan Chosŏnin kun wianbu tŭl*, vol. 2.

^{xv}Yun Turi: *Ibid.*, vol. 1.

^{xvi}Ch'oe Kapsun: *Kiŏg ŭro tashi ssŭnŭn yŏksa*.

^{xvii}Yun Sunman: *Ibid.*

^{xviii}Mun P'ilgi: *Kangje ro kkŭllyŏgan Chosŏnin kun wianbu tŭl*, vol. 1.

^{xix}Yi Yŏngsuk: *Ibid.*

^{xx}Ch'oe Kapsun: *Kiŏg ŭro tashi ssŭnŭn yŏksa*.

^{xxi}Chŏng Oksun: Ito Takashi, "Chiok ŭi hyŏngbŏl poda tŏ ch'ittŏllinŭn Ilbon'gun ŭi manhaeng" (Japanese brutality, more horrifying than punishment in hell), *Hangyŏre* 21, October 22, 1998.

^{xxii}Ri Sangok: Ito Takashi, "Pukhan wianbu halmŏni tŭr ŭi chŭngŏn" (Testimony by elderly comfort women from North Korea), "Eyewitnesses."

^{xxiii}Kim Ŭnjin: *Kangje ro kkŭllyŏgan Chosŏnin kun wianbu tŭl*, vol. 2.

^{xxiv}Kim Ŭnjin: *Ibid.*

^{xxv}Hxx (pseudonym): *Tǔllinayo?*

^{xxvi}Bxx (pseudonym; b. 1929): *Tǔllinayo?*

^{xxvii}Chin Kyōngp'aeng: *Kangje ro kkǔllyōgan Chosōnin kun wianbu tǔl*, vol. 2.

^{xxviii}Ri Kyōngsaeng: "Sǔlp'ūn kwihyang 1 pu."

^{xxix}Ri Kyōngsaeng: *Ibid.*

^{xxx}Pak Yōni: *Kangje ro kkǔllyōgan Chosōnin kun wianbu tǔl*, vol. 2.

^{xxxi}Yi Yongnyō: *Iid.*, vol. 1.

^{xxxii}No Ch'ōngja: *Yōksa rūl mandūnūn iyagi.*

^{xxxiii}Chin Kyōngp'aeng: *Kangje ro kkǔllyōgan Chosōnin kun wianbu tǔl*, vol. 2.

^{xxxiv}Ch'oe Illye: *Ibid.*

^{xxxv}Kim Hwaja: *Yōksa rūl mandūnūn iyagi.*

^{xxxvi}Zeng Jiandao (a Taiwanese comfort woman, victim of the Japanese military): "Kkūnnajianūn chōnjaeng, Ilbon'gun wianbu" (Endless war, comfort women for the Japanese military), broadcast on "KBS p'anorama p'ūllōsū," August 8, 2013.

^{xxxvii}Yō Pokshil: *Kangje ro kkǔllyōgan Chosōnin kun wianbu tǔl*, vol. 2.

^{xxxviii}Yi Sangok: *Ibid.*, vol. 1.

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About the Author



Kim Sum was born in 1974 in the city of Ulsan, South Kyöngsang Province, and earned a degree in Social Welfare from Taejön University. She first appeared in print in 1997 and has since published six story collections and nine novels. She is the recipient of the Hō Kyun (2012), *Hyundae munhak* (2013), Daesan (2013), Yi Sang (2015), and Tongni-Mogwöl (2017) literary prizes as well as the 2017 Special Reunification Prize. *One Left* is her first novel to appear in English translation.

About the Translators



Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton are the translators of numerous volumes of modern Korean fiction, including the award-winning women's anthology *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers* (Seal Press, 1989) and, with Marshall R. Pihl, *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*, rev. and exp. ed. (M.E. Sharpe, 2007). Their most recent translations are *Moss*, a graphic novel by Yoon Taeho (serialized at *The Huffington Post*, 2015-16); *The Future of Silence: Fiction by Korean Women* (Zephyr Press, 2016), *The Human Jungle*, a novel by Cho Chŏngnae (Chin Music Press, 2016), *Sunset: A Ch'ae Manshik Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2017); and *Mina*, a novel by Kim Sagwa (Two Lines Press, 2018). Bruce Fulton is the inaugural holder of the Young-Bin Min Chair in Korean Literature and Literary Translation, Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia. He is co-translator (with Kim Chong-un) of *A Ready-Made Life: Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), co-editor (with Youngmin Kwon) of *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology* (Columbia University Press, 2005), and editor of *Waxen Wings: The Acta Koreana Anthology of Short Fiction From Korea* (Koryo Press, 2011). The Fultons have received several awards and fellowships for their translations, including two National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowships and a residency at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre, the first ever awarded for translators from any Asian language. For their translation of [One Left](#), Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton received an America PEN Heim Translation Grant, only the second such award for a Korean project.