

Son from a Rural Bakery Becomes a Novelist

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When the jury for the 2003 Dongin Literary Prize gave the award to Kim Yeon-su for his collection of short stories entitled (in Korean) "When I Was Still a Child," they wrote in their report: "The author throws a stone into the pond of personal, concrete experience, raising ripples that spread in circles, pioneering a precious recovery of Korea's very recent history." "New York Bakery" is one of the stories from that collection.

"I often recall scenes of Gimcheon, that small town where we used to live; those days seem to have been perfect. You recall Nam Gyeong Ban's store where there used to be a photograph of Chiang Kai-shek and a calendar with views of Taiwan? Still now we can remember everything from those times. We know the origins of the shops that used to line the streets of Gimcheon in those days like the palms of our hands. Of course, inevitably, there was violence and swearing and struggle for survival. But at least those people were people who thought that they were not going to owe anything to other people. They never thought, as people do nowadays, that I will win through while others go bankrupt. The people of those times feel like living beings. Since time is like an endlessly turning bicycle pedal, even those memories are unfamiliar to me, like the husks of insects, yet those days alone still seem to me to have been perfect times."

Those words were spoken by Kim Yeon-su, one of Korea's recognized contemporary writers, to the poet Mun Dae-jun, a home-town friend and fellow-writer. In discussing the story "New York Bakery" it is important to evoke two aspects. First, the emotions specific to the generation of writers born in the 1970s. The other, the regional specificity of Gimcheon, a small town forming a kind of special "inland island" in the middle of North Gyeongsang province. Oddly, the two coincide even as they diverge. That is where Kim Su-yeon's writing has its roots.

"New York Bakery" really was the name of a bakery on the square in front of Gimcheon station. Kim Su-yeon's parents ran it. According to the poet Mun Dae-jun, after school was over Kim Yeon-su used to read poetry books—Rimbaud or Hwang Ji-u—or a literary review he subscribed to, while he looked after the shop. There is one particular episode:

He was sitting beside the coal-briquette stove reading a poetry-book when an elderly monk came in. The monk asked what kind of book he was reading. Kim Su-yeon replied that it was Rimbaud's poems. The monk replied, "Young man, keep doing that for ten years. Something great will result." Kim Su-yeon says that hearing those words, he thought, "I must write for just ten years, then I am sure to get somewhere," making up his mind.

I have seen a few photos taken when he was a child. In one, he is riding a tricycle. In the background hangs the shop-sign "New York Bakery." He is right in front of the store. The little boy is smiling sunnily. The blinds are down to keep the sun out and stuck on the window is a sheet of paper bearing the inscription, in 1970's-style writing, "Quality cakes. Hot cocoa."

For his young mother, every penny counted in those days, so she was obliged to be

sparing about letting her son have cake. He could not even think of eating properly shaped cakes; instead, little Kim Yeon-su's share was the left-over scraps trimmed off sponge cake, cut into regular-shaped pieces and put in a bag as "*girebbashi*." Trimmed-off scraps. Not looking good enough to sell, but impossible to just throw away. As the story says, "I never tired of red-bean buns, cream cakes, muffins, soft rice-cakes, doughnuts, or white bread, but I did finally grow weary of *girebbashi*." So they ended up being fed to the family's puppy, just before they grew too stale, but later even the puppy turned up its nose at them. As the writer concludes, "Life is like that, after all. Excess cloy the appetite."

On a personal note, I and Kim Yeon-su have the same age. That is to say that we share the same generational experiences and memories. Young Koreans born in the 1970s and growing up in the 1980s still had no notion of "varying tastes," they all enjoyed and consumed a similar popular culture. Just as we were beginning primary school we started to hear about color television. Boys focussed on Kim Il's professional wrestling and the cartoon movie "Five Eagle Brothers." Once we were in middle school we received our baptism into pop music. Thanks to having had the same experiences during our childhood and youth, even though I never never tasted *girebbashi* I can naturally sympathize with the depiction of the period's lacks and satisfactions that the *girebbashi* symbolize.

In 1993, Kim Yeon-su began his literary career, first as a poet. Then in the following year he made his debut as a fiction-writer with "Walking Along Pointing at Masks." If we include the poems, he has been writing for twenty years now. The works he has published in that time cover a whole spectrum, but one quotation that helps define his work is: "Staying in tune with the special experiences and the focus on status of the 1970s generation, I try to capture with sharp feeling and a restrained style the subtle or painful moments of self-awareness experienced by people who lived through the 'generation of loss'."

"New York Bakery" is an autobiographical work combining memory and meditation, a work that reveals the author's psychological roots. As the opening phrase indicates, the story was written in pencil, suggesting that he felt that a more manual process was needed to match the way he was baring his face.

The following comes from something reported about Kim Yeon-su in a newspaper;

"My four-year-old son is happy when he gets a 'Fail' message after playing games on my smart-phone. I asked him if he knew what 'fail' meant and he replied 'Repeat.'

Everyone will find different charms in Kim Yeon-su's works but for me, the special charm of his work lies in the way as I read, 'fail' becomes synonymous with 'repeat'. That leaves me both happy and grateful.