

“A Ghost of Collectivity: Kim Hyesoon’s *Autobiography of Death*,” *Denver Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2019), 106–12.

Autobiography of Death, by Kim Hyesoon. Translated by Don Mee Choi. With drawings by Fi Jae Lee. New York: New Directions, 2018.

The most instructive line ever uttered about the contemporary South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon (born 1955) comes courtesy of the poet herself, closing out a 2013 interview with literary critic Shin Hyông-ch’ôl, and isn’t even a complete sentence:

SHIN: For someone who has stepped into your world of poetry for the first time, especially readers abroad, would you please share several key words for your poetry?

KIM: Death, Woman, [South] Korea, You, Seoul, Absence, Illness, Rats, Poetry.

The personal and the political, the self and the nation, matters of world-historical importance and meta-poetic thought experiments: for decades, Kim’s poetry has stomped all over these familiar oppositions, casually crisscrossing back and forth. And she has stumbled on oppositions of her own, too fine or too bizarre to occur to any poets previous: the ghost of existence distinguishing “Death” from “Absence,” or the siegemes, internal and external, of “Illness” (ick) and “Rats” (eek). What makes Kim’s line so informative and hilarious in equal measure is its toneless exactitude: to recite Kim’s pile-up of key words without smirking, you would have to sound thoroughly deadpan, or thoroughly dead. In Kim’s poems (as opposed to her interview responses), this scatterbrained array of topics inevitably converges and clashes on a contested territory, the body. The body, especially the female or maternal body, is Kim’s elastic, obsessively reconceived canvas: she treats it as an individual specimen or a stand-in of collective brutalization, a matter of public debate or the victim of inexcusable neglect. But the body is always, at root, a haphazard conglomeration of physical matter. Sloshing about with viscera and

fluids, Kim's bodies always seem seconds away from rupture, ready to seep across the rigid boundaries laid down by patriarchal stricture and clear-cut decorum.

Lauded in her home country and around the globe, Kim is the best-known and most influential Korean poet in the United States, now or ever. That claim may sound more superlative than it is, considering the insular, translation-allergic habits of contemporary-poetry readers in the United States: here, Homer and Rumi reign as bestsellers (comparatively) while the newest poets from Greece and Iran go unread. Kim's deep reach into English-language audience is thanks, in part, to the devoted, quasi-collaborative work of the translator Don Mee Choi and editors Joyelle McSweeney and Johannes Göransson, whose Notre Dame-based Action Books has published Kim's collections, in Choi's translations, since 2008's *Mommy Must be a Fountain of Feathers*. But the credit is due, finally, to Kim herself—to her genius for detonating social formalities and neat formalisms, her virtuosity with jump-scares and gross-outs, and her askew sense of humor, which seems presciently millennial, giddy to scramble and recombine familiar terms. *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* (2014), the first Kim trans. Choi collection I came across, rendered itself unforgettable with its title alone, an indie-band name ready for the taking; it won me over entirely by the table of contents, a procession of miniature exuberances, poems in themselves: “Dear Choly, From Melan”; “Deathless or Lifeless I Don't Know”; “All the Rats of the World, Unite!”; “I'm OK, I'm Pig!”

First published in South Korea in 2016 and translated by Choi in 2018, *Autobiography of Death* is Kim's first collection released in the US by New Directions. And it is her first collection to be presented less as a carnivalesque collection than as a concerted book-length sequence: first, the titular *Autobiography*, a forty-nine-part diary spanning from “Commute” (Day One) to “Don't” (Day Forty-Nine), and then the separate poem “Face of Rhythm,” whose

hallucinatory fragments form a patchwork coda. The new book's title may be less splashy than *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream*, but the provocations it teases are far more unsettling. What does Death have to say about life-writing? And if Death really penned an autobiography, what might I expect to learn from reading it—and what if I find myself name-checked in its pages? Besides Kim's poems and hieroglyph-like, creepily expressionless drawings by Fi Jae Lee, *Autobiography* features a handful of enlightening bonus features in prose; in one, a 2017 interview with Choi, Kim explains the title sequence's overarching architecture:

In Korea, we believe that when someone dies, the spirit of the dead journeys to an intermediate space that is neither death nor life for forty-nine days. I think that I may be still roaming about in one of the forty-nine days. But if I'm really alive, how is it that each and every day meaninglessly disappears into oblivion?

Kim's forty-nine poems, one per day, do not consistently narrate any one person's life or one spirit's journey—after all, following death's denouement, what single story is there to tell? In *Autobiography*, each individual person, each failing body, goes through its own death, but Kim's capital-D Death is plural, collective, tallying up those killed in political tragedies and preventable atrocities. “I came to think that I, we are all part of the structure of death, that we remain living in it,” Kim remembers in her interview: “I wanted a ghost of collectivity to emerge from the poems.” Choi's “Translator's Note” (another prose bonus) specifies which political structures and collective victims Kim had in mind: “she said that she had no choice” but to write *Autobiography of Death* “because of all the unjust deaths that have occurred in South Korea.” Choi lists the military suppression of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and, more recently, the 2014 sinking of the Sewol passenger ferry (which led to 304 deaths, mostly high-school students). Both events, even decades apart, strike Kim as symptoms of a chronic national epidemic—of, in

Choi's words, "the neocolonial and neoliberal order that has shaped Korea's history since the US intervention at the end of World War II."

Surrealistic as *Autobiography's* premise sounds, it ends up seeming far more consistent than social reality's esoteric codes or the blatant inhumanity sponsored by the state. In "Commute" (Day One), the traversal from life into death is demoted to just another curious incident on the subway ride to work—worthy of a bemused cellphone picture, nothing more. This is how the book opens:

On the subway your eyes roll up once. That's eternity.

The rolled-up eyes eternally magnified.

You must have bounced out of the train. It seems that you're dying.

Even though you're dying, you think. Even though you're dying,
you listen.

Oh what's wrong with this woman? People. Passing by.
You're a piece of discarded trash. Garbage to be ignored.

As soon as the train leaves, an old man comes over.
He discreetly inserts black fingernails inside your pants.

Hoisting her protagonist, an anonymous "you," up and out of life, Kim engineers an out-of-body experience that pivots around to put the body on merciless display: this woman is no sooner dead than disposable, pieced-apart and commodified into property for private consumption. That old man "steals your handbag"; next come "Two middle schoolers," rummaging and kicking, who take a pixelated memento—"Your funeral photo is on the boys' cell phones." Even as this "you," now spirit alone, floats off into the universe, that dead woman's body becomes a distanced "she," an outfit slumped off: "She's stretched out over there. Like a pair of discarded pants." Yet social mandates maintain their internalized stronghold: "You go without your body," the last lines narrate. "Will I get to work on time? You head toward the life you won't be living." Kim has

given us, from one angle, *The Metamorphosis* for the third millennium: like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Kim's "You" finds her body on the far side of an inexplicable transformation, her mind still timed to the work week's rhythms. From another angle, this is a fable about women's labor, if barely a fable, fit for the #MeToo era: there's no retiring from work, even after death; we, the aggrieved onlookers, ask "Oh what's wrong with this woman?" even as we ransack her, body and property and all, for every salvageable scrap.

Kim has refined a poetics that can shift breathlessly between understatement and overflow, chilly sustain and ruptured release. If one couplet paces itself, searchingly—no, you're not quite "discarded trash," try this: you're "Garbage to be ignored"—the next sends shivers, describing a violation at once clinical ("discreetly inserted") and occult ("black fingernails," eerily severed from their fingers). Kim's most distinctive tones sound "wrong," upending the expected reactions. Absurdities are ballooned up into exclamatory urgency—"Put a diaper on that woman's heart!"—while matters of life and death are weighed on with declarative, even blasé authority: "This is the way to know that you're already dead," begins the Dickinsonian "Butterfly," Day Eleven. Her other favorite effects are taser-zaps of profanity and pratfalls into the abject: "Today, Mommy cooks pan-fried hair / Yesterday, Mommy cooked braised thighs / Tomorrow, Mommy will cook sweet and sour fingers." When Kim overplays these word-for-word substitutions, she forecasts her surprises and dulls their shock value—one whiff of "pan-fried hair," and I remember I've already eaten, thanks. She drives into deeper terrors when she conducts her substitutions on the body, recasting human life as demythologized matter. "Broth made from ribs rises and falls in your body," she reports on Day Thirty-Five. "The ribs are your coffin, carrying you around."

Kim finds “the structure of death” scaffolding all of life; her poems reconstruct that “structure” within every form, every genre, both literary and nonliterary: fairy tales and prayers, interrogations (of the freshly dead) and inventories (of body parts), a “Dinner Menu” (Day Twenty-Nine) and “A Lullaby” (Day Thirty-Seven: “Sleep, sleep my baby, die soon so you’ll be at ease, so you won’t have to cry”). Death, Kim’s epigraphs and allusions suggest, even boasts its own syllabus. Its world canon spans religious texts—the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Book of Revelation—and contemporary found texts, stemming from the national tragedies inspiring Kim’s sequence, that allow Kim to cede her vatic commandments and give voice to individual grievance. “*I can’t swallow the pills because my throat hurts,*” reads one embedded line, quoted from “A Psychological Study of Suicide Prevention and Societal Support for the Participants of the Democratic Movement, May 1980 Gwangju Uprising.” If any tactic unites *Autobiography*’s forty-nine entries, it is their persistent second-person “you”—the catch-all pronoun that Kim stuffs full of alive someones, dead somethings, and Death itself. When asked by Choi about “the relentless use of ‘you’ in *Autobiography*,” Kim revisited some questions of her own:

Which individual narrates my death? Can I call my death “I”? As I began to speak through my death, my death became “you.” My death made the I into “not I.” . . . The I endlessly sought after “you” through my language and death, and in order for my sensations to enter the world of poetry where “you” resides, it had to charm, declare my death, and confess its love for “you.”

Kim’s “you”—her “not I,” the death that is life’s beloved—is the demonic innovation at *Autobiography*’s heart. Not since Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) has a contemporary poet so drastically hacked the lyric’s network of pronouns and installed her own malicious meanings. An overreaching lyric “you” risks sounding hectoring, presumptuously out-of-bounds (imagine how much offence you could summon hearing “You must change your life” from anyone but Rilke, or your therapist). Kim, recognizing that risk, ingeniously weaponizes it.

What better vehicle for death's imperatives, its never-miss targeting systems and its impossible-to-refuse offers, than an obstinate "you"? Sure, nearly nothing that "A Face," Day Forty-Three, claims about "you" (the pronoun) may be true for you (the reader): "Now you've become toeless feet. Now you've become fingerless hands. You've become a noseless, mouthless face." But that sense of mistaken identity, that indignant conviction that Kim must have the wrong "you," is indispensable to *Autobiography*: it is something like the feeling, familiar to the living and the imminently dying who populate these poems, that death works too sloppily and visits far too soon. At least, as Kim reaffirms in *Autobiography*'s forty-ninth and final entry, death never forgets its appointments with "you," even if nothing else in nature will miss you in the least:

The river is frozen eighty centimeters deep, a tank passes over it,
and the fish beneath the ice don't miss you

The dog tied to the electric pole in front of the tobacco shop for
fourteen years doesn't miss you

While the big wind takes away thousands of women dead from
madness

the sound of the "you's" of your whole life, your hair falling

all of the winter landscape, wailing and wielding its whip doesn't
miss you

No one and nothing and nowhere missing you: an appropriate finale for *Autobiography*'s central sequence, but a discordant, too-dismal note for the book as a whole. Those ice-insulated "fish" might not miss you, but Kim does; alone amid this frigid landscape, she remembers the targeted, collective violence against "thousands of women," registering the seasons' tempo and the percussion of its whipping winds.

And so the book reenters life with one last poem, the astonishing "Face of Rhythm," which orchestrates a cacophony from the polyrhythms of breath and speech, of the individual life

cycle and collective history. “Woman’s body is tied up to rhythm,” Kim establishes early, then draws kookier connections between internal and external rhythms: “My heart beats like a girl marathon runner who only had ramen to eat,” she ventures, then concludes more soberly, “I wonder whether the souls of all the people on earth are connected as one.” Something odd happens in the very last lines of *Autobiography of Death*: the first thing you might expect from anyone else’s death-centered collection, it is the last thing you would expect from Kim. At last—after page upon page alternating operatic outburst with impassive cool, cartoonish zombies with body-horror splatters—someone is crying:

Forsake me when the mountains prostrate beneath the night plane
with pouches of pain dangling from them
Forsake me somewhere far far

Dwarf weeps at the feet of pain

Weeps, finally

Midway through her title sequence, Kim asked, inside whispered parentheses: “(Did you know that / our existence is lumped together by the sound of our weeping?)” Back then, she held back her tears, cleared her throat, and kept speaking to her audience, the already-dead. When, at *Autobiography*’s close, she “Weeps, finally,” that’s for you.

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