



Jack Saebyok Jung: “To write poetry is to witness my death in poetry. The apex of poetry is the moment of death, the moment when only death remains in the shape of a mustard seed and all else becomes absence. Thus, the act of writing a poem now means to endure while embracing a firefly-like death with a gentle breath.”

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, and you just heard Jack Saebyok Jung reading a poem by the acclaimed avant-garde poet Kim Hyesoon. Jack is a poet and translator, and he recently translated a book by Kim Hyesoon called *Lady No*. Originally published in 2014 as a series of anonymous blog posts, *Lady No* is a collection of experimental poetry and prose that documents Kim’s first foray into digital performance art. Set in a fictional land called Aerok, or Korea spelled backward, the collection explores the anxieties and obsessions of modern Korean society, often using aspects of the occult to point at what is unspeakable or unsaid. In my conversation with Jack, we talk about how Kim Hyesoon’s poetry resists and outmaneuvers censorship, Kim’s aspiration to achieve transparent poetry, how poetry can respond to the pressures of everyday life, and the shamanic dimensions of Kim’s work. Plus, Jack reads a few poems from *Lady No*. So here’s my conversation with Jack Saebyok Jung.

James Shaheen: Okay, so I'm here with poet Jack Saebyok Jung. Hi Jack. It's great to be here with you.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Thank you for having me.

James Shaheen: So Jack, we're here to talk about your new translation, *Lady No*, which is a translation of poetry by the prominent Korean poet Kim Hyesoon. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to translate it?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Sure. So, *Lady No*, it's one of Kim Hyesoon's probably strangest and most openly hybrid books. So, it started in 2014. It has its origin in 2014. And by that point within the



Korean literacy scene, she was already very much an established major figure in Korean poetry. But then when she started posting these, she went anonymous. It was a blog through a major Korean publisher called Munhakdongne. And these were posted pretty much weekly, five to six pieces at a time on the blog of Munhakdongne, done under a pseudonym. There was an original pseudonym, which later changed into *ahn-ah*. *Ahn-ah* is a Korean adjunctive verbal form, a grammatical particle that you can drop in and it negates the sentence. After a couple of different versions, we decided on, or I've rendered it as Lady No.

Kim Hyesoon in 2014 kept it up for eight months. The artist Fi Jae Lee paired her drawings with these texts as they were being blog posted and became sort of like digital performance art. And then when all 179 pieces were gathered into a book later in 2016, these came out as what people thought were poems, prose poems, sometimes opinion columns, sometimes travel logs. And it was like a real grab bag that was sort of refusing to sit still. And Kim call them *shisanmun*, which would literally translate as poetry prose.

So I think what drew me in was this kind of voice that was very colloquial and slangy. For those who are American and English poetry readers who were getting to know Kim Hyesoon through amazing translations by Don Mee Choi, they tended to be more iconically, surreal work. And here it was very much almost like an everyday voice of the poet that was emerging. It's like you get to see her watching television. You get to hear all these small humiliations and hopes of a creative writing professor. You get her grief over the tragedy of the Sewol ferry disaster in South Korea. And they're all being braided together with her uncanny imagination. So it was almost like a window into almost like a code or source code, even, if I might say that, behind her whole worldview. So I really wanted to take a chance to not only appreciate that for myself but share it with the English readers as well.

James Shaheen: Any reason that she chose to be anonymous?



Jack Saebyok Jung: So those kind of blogs back in the day, I don't think they do them anymore, it wasn't just her but some other writers were also posting them anonymously and then sharing there. Sometimes it would be novels; sometimes it'd be poetry. In Kim Hyesoon's case, I think she started it to almost say whatever she wants, though she later on doctored it obviously, but I think as it was happening, I think the website pages are archived now. I had a hard time tracking the actual pages myself because it's all in the older blog formats in Korea. But you can see all these comments of people like, “Oh, who is this person who's posting?” And then later when it was revealed, some of the last comments were like, “Oh, this is like basically like the hidden singer, *The Masked Singer* show,” or “Oh, this is a famous poet we know who's been doing all these posts.” So I can see some of the posts being maybe slightly more spicy than she's usually like in other essays or other poetry as well.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So that anonymity afforded her some latitude.

Jack Saebyok Jung: I think so. Yeah.

James Shaheen: Okay. So before we get to the collection itself, I wanted to ask you about Kim's background. She began her literary career in the late seventies at a time when South Korea was run by military dictatorships. So can you talk a bit about her work as an editor during such a turbulent time?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Right. So before she was a poet, she was a literary editor working at a South Korean publishing house. And this was the late 1970s. This was during the height of the Park Chung-hee regime administration. He was one of the crew leaders who basically was working as a president for life in South Korea, and he wouldn't be the first or the last of Korean dictators. And oftentimes these military dictatorships in South Korea were propped up by Cold War anti-Communism. And with that came secret police in all but name who could arrest anyone that they deemed ideologically threatening. There were censors. And so in a sense, Kim Hyesoon's first job in literature was standing directly in front of that kind of state power. And



one story that she references here in one of the later parts of the poetry prose and also something that she has talked about in other essays and that became a famous starting point for her poetry career was when she was editing and helping to publish a Korean translation of a biography of a famous American labor rights activist, Mary G. Harris Jones, more popularly known as Mother Jones. She was summoned to a police station, which happened very often. And the interrogators demanded the name and the address and the phone number of the book's translator. And when she refused to give them up, she started getting slapped around really brutally and violently. And she remembered counting those seven times. And in her early collection of poetry titled *The Hell of That Star*, which was also translated and came out this year translated by Cindy Juyoung Ok from Wesleyan Press, an early part of that book are those seven poems that were written for each blow. So that's sort of like the beginnings of where her poetry grew out of. And it wasn't necessarily a poetry that was coming from a kind of greenhouse of protection but something that was straight up facing down these censors and violence that was being done to her and her other writers by the state power.

James Shaheen: So you say that to live and write under that regime was to hear again and again the word “no.” Of course, the book is called *Lady No*. And over time the nature of the censorship shifted as South Korea underwent political upheaval, and a new type of “no” emerged. So can you talk about how Kim wrote against the pressures and demands of the obsession with productivity in Korean society and our own?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Of course. So this book having been published in 2014, I think just looking back in the past couple of decades of South Korean history, we go from a country initially devastated by the Korean War, just nothing there, into this sort of a push toward an economic renaissance would happen, the Miracle on the Han River, as they push and push, push toward growing the country, no matter the cost. And that would also be driven by those military dictatorships. And in that time also, the student activists and civilian activists fighting for democracy, turning around by mid 1980s. Famously the 1986 June uprising would be the



flashpoint where Korea more or less became fully democratized with a new constitution that will be developed in the aftermath of the nationwide uprising. Then I think with that euphoria of countries emerging from the darkness, suddenly speeding toward what I think many people would now call a kind of late capitalism, this is an economy that's driven with infinite competition. Everyone just focused on more and more and more and more productivity, just grinding ourselves into dust for the sake of this idea or concept of improvement, no matter the cost, or more money, no matter the cost.

So, in that regard, poetry that was often censored and put down, literature, not just poetry, censored and put down and jailed for its dangerous ideas, now becomes something that's put aside because it's not part of that efficiency or it's not part of that kind of a grinding toward the infinite competition that this hypercharged capitalist society calls for. And she in this volume especially is navigating this kind of changing shift of what that “no” meant from perhaps even a simpler, brutal type of a “no” to this strangely complicated “no” of free, but not quite free in a way that we thought it would be.

James Shaheen: So you describe Kim's work as a testament to what language can do in a world designed to say no at every turn, outmaneuvering censors and providing language for the precarity of modern life. So how is poetry perhaps uniquely suited to respond to these pressures?

Jack Saebyok Jung: I see. Yeah. I think that pressure that you're mentioning, it definitely didn't flatten her. And I think one way that pressure expressed itself was that she became more elliptical. And this haunting, tightly woven style that she's well known for in her poetry, a really rhythmic charge full of these dark spells and hidden occluded truths, I think on a practical level, it can be read as moving around those censors rather than straight at them. These kind of leaps and depths and indirections is I think, and not just for her, but for many of her generation, partly an aesthetic of survival. You can see that happening as a kind of a way of saying these forbidden things by refusing to say it directly. And in one piece in *Lady No*, as well as in another poem that she's written, she has a piece called “Witch Type Poet.” She calls herself a witch for the way her



poem sort of straddled a line between ordinary reality and these almost occult disturbances. And there's a very feminist defiance in all that.

She also from the beginning wrote about death, death not as a final sort of closure but as this kind of continuous resolution, where the bodies are collapsing and the line between life and afterlife keeps receding. So, in that sense, I think that censorship, the very direct military dictatorship censorship, and death become sort of bound together in her work because both are these forms of forced disappearance. And I think she insisted on writing into exactly that. So the dark fantasies of her work, the surreal landscapes, are in fact a direct addressing of that hidden disappearance that has been caused by those kind of pressures of “No.” So she's almost like trying to rescue these things from disappearing completely.

James Shaheen: Right, you could say there are many forms of death that lurk in Kim's poems, some of which seem to point to new forms of life, and you liken this aspect of her work to the voice of a *mudang*, or Korean shaman, calling up ancestors and gods. So can you talk about the shamanic dimensions of her work?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Sure. Yeah. The *mudang*, the Korean local folk religion, has been around since time immemorial, and it's an oral tradition. Though there are male shamans, it's largely Korean women who become these *mudang*. I think some people have tried to locate it as just so that it's not simply transmitted, I think, as shamanism, but it has a sort of similarities between other folk religions around the world as well.

I was talking to a friend of mine who is also studying Korean shamanism and its effects and its influences on Korean literature, fellow translator Min Ji Choi, and her PhD thesis is about this and, in a sense, that shamans are a speaker for the dead. So they channel the dead spirit so that they can commune and communicate with the living. And I think the dismissal that Korean shamanism has gone through, not just in contemporary culture but also throughout the Confucian driven dynasty that was the Joseon dynasty kingdom era, it's been marginalized, it's been driven



into the mountains. The women were looked down upon because of it, but it has survived all this time. And I think that it's because they serve this role of connecting us to the dead and also ultimately allowing us to heal through confronting and being able to work through the losses that we have suffered in life.

And in a sense, when Kim Hyesoon is channeling or presenting herself as this type of shaman or borrowing from this kind of mudang tradition, she is attempting to speak for many different kinds of dead, from immediate family members to the Korean women who have been oppressed and also the history of Korea that has often been marginalized. And by letting them speak through her, she is ultimately allowing this kind of healing to take place.

James Shaheen: Yeah, this is in many ways tied to her view of her sense of the occult, being a witch. And it's interesting how the eerie in her work can point toward the unspeakable or the unsaid in a society where so much is left unsaid. Does that make sense?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh yes. Thank you. Yeah, that's very well put.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So it's also linked to Kim's description of *Lady No* as an attempt to achieve transparent poetry. And I say that because there's such obfuscation, especially under the dictatorship and even afterward and almost self-imposed in many ways when people succumb to the cult of productivity. It's not so terribly different here. So how do you think about this aspiration for transparency in relation to these histories of marginalization?

Jack Saebyok Jung: I see. I think that transparency, you know, she says in her afterward very plainly, “I wanted to achieve transparent poetry,” and then she talked about how this desire deepened day by day until she basically was having these out-of-body experiences. And you can read that in some of the poetry proses collected here as well as in the afterward. She describes it as like looking at herself blankly as if from outside. So I think this transparent poetry is almost like the moment when something soars out of the body and then the borders of the self go vague.



You know, the limits of individuality dissolve. So I'm pretending to be writing about Mozart but in fact writing about myself, or writing about another me all the way down at the bottom. And then there's the sense of becoming a poet for this invisible girl. I think in many ways there is a sense of her poetic soul almost being part of this greater thing that's in some sense caught in the mortal realm, almost unable to escape it. And there it begins to find absurdity in its situation and sometimes dark humor in it. And I think that's coming out as requiring this kind of transparency and to dissolve all this so that this greater thing, this mystery, can finally be revealed through the person in a sense.

James Shaheen: You know, there's a quote, and I don't know if it relates directly to what you're talking about. Poetry is always difficult; there are different interpretive approaches. But I just wonder about what you were just talking about, and I'm sorry, I can't remember which poem it is, but there's something I wrote down just because I really liked it. The quote is, "An escape in which one who despises being fully understood ends up losing oneself within the text." And you mentioned escape, so I wonder, how do you understand that line in relation to what you just said? Or does it really have nothing to do with that?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Well, with *Lady No*, we talked about no before more in a political sense. But I think that transparency and negation almost turned out to be the same gesture that's seen from two angles. So to become transparent is to negate this opaque, defended self. And then you want to let the light pass through the I until you can barely find it, basically. So going back to that early question about anonymity, it was in a sense done through the blog, done through almost like a marketing type of way and then also allowing yourself to be able to say whatever you want because it's anonymous. But then anonymity is also almost like a practical social version of this kind of negating of the self, so that you can kind of go beyond this opaque, defended version of the self, and then the transparency is the not of that self. And then when you do that, I think you are dissolved into this thing you created, which is the text, and then only the text remains. And so I think that's what your quote is getting at as well.



James Shaheen: Right. Again, about the ‘I’ disappearing, in “The Name of Poetry” she writes, “The poetry of ‘I’ is where the name of ‘I’ is erased. There ‘I’ is the one who is most terrified of the name of ‘I.’” So I thought that was really nice. I don't know if you want to say anything about that or if, again, I'm reading too much into this.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh, I don't think so. I think that's right on point in that regard. When you're translating, maybe it's just me, but there is a tendency of temptation because Kim Hyesoon is so dazzling a poet, so you want to make the poems be more poetic or more dense, more opaque. But there was a time when Kim Hyesoon was telling me, “You gotta hold it back.” I showed her one of the things where I was trying to recreate her wordplay in English, and the transparency of the original poet was asking a kind of opposite of me, which was I tried to keep the surface more clear and more immediate so that the kind of colloquial almost at times journal-like flow could stay legible so that the reader can also look through the language and get to that strangeness lurking underneath.

James Shaheen: The genre of Lady know is also bound up in this negation, as you mentioned, as Kim calls the text *shisanmun*, or minus poetry, minus prose, which I found very interesting. So tell us about this hybrid genre and how this collection refuses a kind of neat categorization.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Yeah, she gets to this moment in her afterword where she says that if we call this poetry, poetry will get mad, and if we call this prose, prose will get mad. And she continues to go on that poetry rises higher than this, and prose reaches lower. Bit of a riddle. But then she coins the term *shisanmun*. It's not prose poem. It's poetry prose. Sometimes it was called po-prose. Sometimes we thought maybe we could do it as a proem. We liked proem, but it's an actual term, so we can't use that. So minus poetry, minus prose; not poetry, not prose. Again, the negation. So, it's a genre that hangs in the gap between the two. And I think prose poems are really poems, whereas this here is straddling this being in between. There are Korean poets like Kim Su-young that she mentions. There is also Baudelaire, who said he was writing poetry even when he was writing prose. And in “Fiction and Poetry,” which you pointed out, it's almost like a



manifesto for this: “To write fiction is to record that life is a marvelous lie” and “To write poetry is to witness my death in poetry.” So two opposed impulses that she insists on holding at once.

So I think for American readers, it's a fascinating case because now a lot of these pieces would get called lyric essays I think. There have been some terms or creative nonfiction events in our context. But she's not considering them as poems or essays. So she's trying to reassemble both forms into something new while sort of honoring this elasticity of the Korean literary tradition that she's coming from as well. So the negation in this genre is like the negation in the title, refusing the established categories all the way down.

James Shaheen: Yeah. That can't have made your job any easier. I'm pretty amazed in your description of this new form that you were able to take this on or willing to take this on. But you just quoted from the piece “Fiction and Poetry,” which we published online, and just to give the reader a sense of what we're talking about since it is so different, would you be willing to read that prose poem in full, or I don't even know if I should call it prose poem—

Jack Saebyok Jung: Poetry prose.

James Shaheen: Poetry prose. Thank you. It's on page 29.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Yeah. Thank you. I'll go ahead and read it.

“Fiction and Poetry”

To write fiction is to record that life is a marvelous lie.

Recording in advance that after you and I disappear, only faint lies will remain, growing even fainter.

Thus, recording in advance the sight of lies, on a street without ‘I,’ being swept away by other lies.

To write poetry is to witness my death in poetry.



The apex of poetry is the moment of death, the moment when only death remains in the shape of a mustard seed and all else becomes absence.

Thus, the act of writing a poem now means to endure while embracing a firefly-like death with a gentle breath.

James Shaheen: Thank you. Can you say something about lies and why lies? I mean, it can mean so many different things, whether it's coming from a government, whether it's an individual story we tell that is in a sense a lie. Can you say something about that?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Yeah, I mean the lies in this case is a translation of the Korean word *geojismalhada*, and yeah, there is no ambiguity about it. It's a lie. The word “lie” is being used directly, and I think there is in Kim Hyesoon's work a sort of seeing the world we live in as a type of an illusion or some kind of veil that's been cast over our eyes. And her work seems to be a constant unveiling by using these dark spells that she has accrued over her lifetime as a master poet. But what's strange about this unveiling is that it's being done by constantly throwing a veil at the same thing. So it's almost like metaphor upon metaphor, metaphor upon metaphor. And then you begin to deconstruct certain perhaps falsehoods or illusions. So that kind of lying upon a lie or lies on a lie being swept away by other lies is in some sense maybe an admission or submission to the fact that this type of illusion that we're in is maybe inescapable. But the only answer to it is perhaps to continue to bring that illusion to court, even to take it further and find your own veils, your own sort of illusions that you have crafted, lying and lying until truth almost escapes, and then you just barely notice it.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I mean, she talks about the disappearing self and transparency. What do these lies have to do with the notion of a self or the writer's self? Is there a connection there? I mean, because it seems to generate and depend on what we might call lies.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Yeah. I think she's really ruthless about the I in these poetry prosers. One of the other pieces that was on *Tricycle* was “What Is Inspiration,” I believe, where poetry happens



when I am staying in another state of being. Poetry leaves the I out of itself into a different condition entirely. And then comes this line that I keep coming back to, which is, “After a poem is finished, it is only right that the ‘I’ in the poem disappears.” She compares it to almost like a drink after you’ve drunk it all, where there are just these bits of I left in the bottom of the glass. So I think she’s saying almost that she’d be lucky to leave behind just enough of herself to read a fortune with. “The Name of Poetry” is another piece that pushes it even harder. The country of poetry is where a name is erased, she writes, and she calls herself the secretary of an invisible girl. So it transcribes what this girl is dictating almost.

So poetry is this language of the one who has fallen beneath her own name, because one’s name carries death. And the I is the thing most terrified of the name. You quoted this earlier. So it’s as if only once you’ve run far from the name does poetry actually begin. And I think if there’s maybe from contemporary American tradition, we might initially hear someone like Whitman say, “Hear my barbaric yawp,” but then if you read Whitman deeply, you can kind of get a sense that he’s actually dissolving himself into this great vision, whether or not that’s a true vision. He’s maybe lying about America, but he’s trying to come up with a vision of America that’s truly democratic. So there’s no more Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*. So I think that’s similar, but again, you can see these poets across time and space. They’re trying to get at this, I think, from different angles.

James Shaheen: Well, before I ask you to read the poem that you just mentioned, there’s a line in the last one, “To write poetry is to witness my death in poetry.” And I think that gets at a lot of what you’re referring to or talking to is, is that fair to say?

Jack Saebyok Jung: I think so. Yeah.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Could you go ahead and read “What Is Inspiration” It’s the one that you just mentioned.



Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh, sure.

“What Is Inspiration”

A student spoke,

“I can’t find inspiration, so I don’t think I will be able to do this assignment.”

Truly, it’s been such a long time since I heard the word inspiration.

That’s right. There is no poem as good as the one before it is put into words.

Poetry is written when ‘I’ am staying in another state of being.

Poetry leads ‘I’ into another state of being.

Poetry is found in a different world called the poetic condition.

Of course, the catalyst for divulging is usually moral indignation or existential alienation,

And the procedure of imagination is often political.

That indignation, that alienation, that hope leads ‘I’

To be in another state of being.

Poetry is the unfolding of another being

And sinking into another state.

It is the shouting of stillness.

Inspiration is the answer one gives when they have heard the words of the other called

‘I’,

It is the impossibility of that answer.

That is why after a poem has been finished,

It is only right that the ‘I’ in the poem disappears.

After drinking it all up, there remain bits of ‘I’ in the glass.



It would be fortunate if I could leave behind just enough of ‘me’ as the remnants needed to cast a fortune.

James Shaheen: Thank you. So once again, we get at this contentious relationship between poetry and identity, and I wonder how Kim's poetry points to the fragmentary nature of the self and poetry's ability maybe to get beyond that I. Or is that just not possible?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Yeah, I think she keeps returning to the fact that it's not possible, the impossibility of it that you're trying to dissolve “I,” but you are still an “I.” And I was recently rereading essays by Jorge Luis Borges, and he actually comes to this very similar almost admission of defeat. After he writes so beautifully about this concept of time that he has where he's trying to make time as a falsehood and then all time is all present all the time, it's very metaphysical, as if he's already knowing about quantum physics in the way we are becoming aware of it, but then at the end he says, “At the end of it all, I'm still Borges.” Like I can't stop being Borges. So, I think not just Kim Hyesoon but many poets around the world seem to come to this idea that, yeah, I cannot stop being myself, but I want to go beyond myself. We try to imagine ourselves in other bodies, in other worlds, in other situations, but there's this return to the body perhaps, sometimes absurd, sometimes grotesque. And that's one of the reasons why many of her poems also tackle that as a dark spell to get the body to almost be connected with each other in some sense.

James Shaheen: And so the poems, for want of a better word um, take place in the fictional land of Aerok or, or Korea spelt backwards. It's another form of negation, a mirror image of Korea where many of the nation's anxieties and obsessions are magnified. So can you tell us a little bit about uh, this mirrored nation?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Right. It's Aerok as Korea reversed, K-O-R-E-A to A-E-R-O-K, and as you're saying, this kind of reversal is doing a lot of work. It's almost another form of negation, this mirror-image country. And it's at once different from Korea, and then it's uncannily the



same. And by this mirror image, it's not simply just showing us the reflection of it, but it's like a magnification of everything, all the anxieties, all the issues around gender politics, the media obsessions, the worship of productivity we talked about before. You know, all of these get exaggerated until you can almost finally see them clearly in a sense.

So it's like a funhouse mirror that is designed to tell the truth. And then the opening piece, “From Aerok,” introduces us to this country: “From Aerok, I write. Barely, here I write.” And then it becomes this makeshift stage of a country, a razzle-dazzle of hollow shells. So it's clinging to this lonely corner of this lonely star, so there is a tenderness in it about this country, and at the same time, there's an indictment. So I think I came to feel strongly while translating these that Aerok isn't only a mirror of Korea. It's being spelled backwards. It's being magnified. It's full of intensifying all the injustices and all the psychic fissures that modern country's going through. And I think honestly it works just as well as a mirror for American life right now. I think that kind of mirror image somehow creates this portability or applicability of this situation that we find ourselves in. I think I definitely wanted English readers to not only visit Aerok but see themselves in Aerok.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I mean, it definitely works that way. It's easily applicable to our own situation. But to take this theme a little further, would you mind reading “From Aerok”? It's on page 2.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh, sure.

“From Aerok”

From Aerok, I write.

Barely, here I write.

Here I will live, and here I will die.



Barely, I will stay until the time comes to move on.

Along streets lined with beauty parlors, boarding houses, hospitals, banks, restaurants, cell phone shops, and fruit stalls, I stay awhile and return to write once more.

How many number of bus rides, and how many number of books, and how many number of films, and how many number of drinks, and how many number of visits to my mother, and how many number of tears . . . await.

Here, in Aerok. Beyond ‘Nothing more to desire.’ Beyond ‘Can no longer live.’

In this makeshift stage of a city, a razzle-dazzle of hollow shells.

In this makeshift stage of a country.

Straightening the hair of my sweater where pink fuzz rises.

The loneliness of a star called Earth floating in the cosmos.

Clinging to a corner of this lonely star, the country of Aerok cradles her tiny skeletal mountains. They are like so many insects banished from outer space.

Like the intoxication with echoes from a well with no water, this writing, is it to be drunk with loneliness?

Here

to live.

To love.

James Shaheen: Thank you. You know, that really sets the tone and the mood for the rest of the book, would you say so?

Jack Saebyok Jung: I would say so, yeah.

James Shaheen: It really casts a kind of spell, I think, and the rest of the book is an echo of that initial poem in the collection. But in the Korean edition of the book, the poems were arranged



differently from how they originally appeared, but for this translation, you chose to publish them in their original chronological sequence, which I appreciated. It gave me some orientation or understanding of what was unfolding. So what do you think is revealed by reading them in sequence?

Jack Saebyok Jung: So in the Korean edition, I would say there are some shifts, but it's largely similar to the order that we have here. The dates or the times that they were published or posted are gone. And there's a key difference where some of the poems that are almost like a craft lessons on what poetry is are shifted toward the end of the Korean sequence. And it might be because by shifting them like that, you get the poems that were directly in response to what was happening at the time during the posting, which was the Sewol ferry disaster tragedy.

James Shaheen: I just want to say that that disaster was when 304 people died on a ferry, and it appears that it was due to negligence. Is that correct? And it was an outrage in Korean society.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Of course. Yeah. There have been a number of these tragedies that were pretty much human made in what I would say is like a systematic failure from private businesses up to government agencies that failed to have regard for the safety of passengers and Korean peoples. Along with the ferry disaster, another hor horrific event was the tragedy that happened a couple of years ago where partygoes during Halloween were crushed to death because of a lack of oversight in crowd control at the time during the festival season.

These sort of things kept happening in Korea as it pushed for efficiency, quote unquote productivity, just more and more making things cheaper, making thing quote unquote easier and faster. And in the name of all that, in the Sewol ferry disaster, we get an overweight passenger ferry with high school students on a field trip trying to get fast through all these rocks off the shore. And then after the crash, it was revealed that the captain and some of the sailors were escaping outright without trying to save the passengers, and the Korean agencies that were



supposed to try to rescue these passengers were unable to do it because they either were disorganized or didn't have the equipment.

And it was, I would say for Americans perhaps watching what happened during Hurricane Katrina live, this inability of the system that was supposed to keep us safeguarded and save us from moments like this failing at every level.

And these blog posts didn't happen in response to that. They were happening, and then it happened. The posts began in March, and then the ferry disaster happened on April 16, 2014. And Kim Hyesoon basically had to stop, and for many writers, many public affairs, there was this period of mourning and shock as this tragedy unfolded on our TV screens. People were trying to find survivors. The divers were going in, but only the dead were coming back out of the water. I was there in Korea at the time and was just dumbfounded into this mourning and shock at just how this could happen and thinking about who is taking accountability for all this.

Kim Hyesoon herself would go into a self-imposed period of mourning and silence for forty-nine days. And that's a significant number, especially for the aftermath of a funeral or a death of someone, where they would travel through the afterlife for forty-nine days. And after those forty-nine days were over, she returned with some of these pieces like “Metaphor Ban” in *Lady No* that sort of addressed the situation.

The ferry disaster captured this Korean moment, this Aerok moment, where all the energy had been put into making everything productive and efficient at the cost of human life, and at the cost of such young lives, an entire high school class gone, and that I think colored the rest of the book.

Now, of course, if you're Korean and then you're reading these, some of the references make immediate sense, and then it would be perhaps too much to present all the dates and what was happening right alongside. But I think for American readers who lack context, giving these dates



and presenting the book as we do here was important for how this context is working and is sort of flowing through the veins of these poems.

James Shaheen: Right. So these poems move between politically inflected events, like the disasters you've described, Kim's everyday life as a university professor, and more surreal reflections on life and death, violence and desire, the role of poetry in uncertain times. Can you talk about the juxtapositions at play here? They seem very important to the work.

Jack Saebyok Jung: The juxtapositions of all those elements, I think that returns to that sense of shamanism. We were talking about before this sense of what my translator friend Min Ji Choi would call the role of the speaker for the dead. You're trying to capture and channel the grief and the need to face or confront the loss that has happened. And it's coming through in both these dark visions, but also through one's role as a person within the society and in this case as a university professor in Kim Hyesoon's case and also being in touch with that kind of a sense something beyond this illusions of everyday life and also the political realities that we are often faced with. The social upheavals and tragedies and disasters sort of all come together so that the debt might be accounted for and spoken for.

James Shaheen: So I also wanted to ask about the process of translation for this book. You cite the translator Don Mee Choi, who describes how translation can be an anticolonial practice. So can you talk a bit about this approach to translation and how it informed your own practice and in particular how can translation preserve what you call Kim's fierce strangeness and refuse to flatten it or smooth it over? We've got a lot going on in that question.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Yeah, we could probably teach a semester worth of class on this question.

James Shaheen: I did hear a lecture of yours.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh yes. Oh boy. So, Don Mee Choi is the translator most responsible for how Kim Hyesoon is read in English, and her thinking is also very foundational for me. She



wrote a pamphlet from Ugly Duckling Presse Press called *Translation is a Mode = Translation is an Anti-Neocolonial Mode*. And in that she argues that translation doesn't have to be an act of assimilation, meaning it's a kind of a colonial habit to smooth out a foreign text to make it clean, crisp, et cetera, you know, to file down its distances or differences even until it reads like it was comfortably written or even born in English. So Don Mee straight up refuses all that. And she is by doing so keeping all the uncanny leaps, the ruptures, the idiosyncratic syntax. And I think in doing so, Don Mee's project is to sort of peel away the colonial overtones rather than reinforcing them by translating something into English that has more global hierarchical power. So she brings Kim into English in a sense on Korean terms, if that makes sense. And then that's what makes this translation act very political.

So my approach, I think, shares the ultimate goal, as you said and as I wrote in my introduction, of preserving Kim's fierce strangeness, refusing to domesticate her in a sense. I think mine may have diverged at certain stylistic junctures, also because the material is very different from quote unquote the main poetry that Kim Hyesoon writes versus this, I think, for lack of better term, more casual work. Don Mee's foregrounding all the rupture with the radical syntax in her versions. And I think in mine, because these were posted and put on the internet for mass audience appeal even, its direct, immediate resonance was what I was going for. I was definitely leaning into the colloquial and even comedic textures. And when I got to know Kim Hyesoon, I realized she's really funny as well.

So I think Don Mee's method was this kind of pure poetry. And mine was to an extent letting the trappings of English prose creep into that poetry. So no translator would claim a perfect single correct reflection, and I hope that my version introduces Kim Hyesoon and another side of Hyesoon in the many-corridorred mirrors that she has set up in her work.



James Shaheen: Yeah, just one word. Aerok is Korea spelled backwards, and of course, those are Roman letters. How does that work in Korean? I mean, is it just the same flip or is something different?

Jack Saebyok Jung: So Aerok in Korean wouldn't work because Korea would call themselves Hanguk, and that's short for Daehan Minguk, which, if you translate literally it would be the great nation of the Han people. And if you flip that, it would be Gukhan, and then that's completely different.

James Shaheen: What is it then? I mean, how did you come upon that?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh no, in Korean, she is using romanized or Koreanized pronunciation of Aerok, so it's Aerok. So when I saw that, it's interesting because it's not using the literary Chinese characters like Hanja which would usually be how it's used. But Aerok almost sounds like a record of either love or sorrow if you have to put literary Chinese characters into it. But yeah, it's a flipped word that's spelled out in the Korean alphabet but sounds like Aerok in Korean as well.

James Shaheen: You describe it as a twisted palindrome, which is something I like. So Jack, maybe people have guessed by now if they don't know that you're also a poet along with being a translator, and you have your own body of work. And I was wondering if you could talk about how translating Kim's work or the act of translation in general has influenced your own writing. It's something I asked the poet and translator Arthur Sze, who's now our poet laureate. So how would you respond to that?

Jack Saebyok Jung: I guess personally for me, translation and writing my own poems have never been separate activities. They feel to me like one practice, and if there is to be a difference, it's that in my own poetry, I have to search deep within something, either myself or the world, to find the gold nugget buried somewhere and bring it out. I remember hearing a lecture by Seamus



Heaney where he described his process translating those old English poems as someone has already gone down to the mine and found the gold vein. I'm just trying to follow the path that he has gone down in it. And when you decide to translate a poem, you are also translating it because you think it's worthwhile to do the work. So the stress is not in trying to find something but more so in trying to really capture what was already done. And I think in a sense, by translating so much, I have learned these pathways that these master poets have gone into the depths of our souls to find those gold nuggets.

And I think for me specifically, translating Kim has changed my poetry in thinking about my relationship to the “I,” this conviction that the I in the poem should disappear, and the poet is this secretary, in her case of an invisible girl. So I think it's made me far more willing to let go of just a merely autobiographical first person and to think of that as not necessarily a material that I need to be truthful to, but perhaps even an illusion that I need to take apart. And I think her sense of death as a continuous unraveling rather than a closure and this shamanistic willingness to let other voices speak through a poem and also this refusal of genre, I think that has sort of loosened something in how I write. I think I'm always curious about what other contemporary poets, especially in America, think of where the lines are now between poetry and prose. What is a poem, and what is what makes a poem a poem? What makes prose a prose? So much of those lines have a blur to an extent. And I found it fascinating that Kim Hyesoon is blurring those lines, but is blurring those lines by initially saying that there are clear differences, that poetry has its own thing going on and prose has its own thing. We cannot call this either poetry or prose, but I am blurring them anyway. So I hope that in a craft manner or the technical side of things, other poets and writers would see this volume and then think about where do these lines actually lie for me, at least.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think the entire work asks those questions. It forces those questions on the reader, and so I found that not challenging in a bad way; it just made me question a lot: Well, what is a poem? What is prose? And what is language doing here? So I think that definitely did



come across, although I'm not a poet, I'm not an American poet asking that question. But I'm going to ask you to read one more poem. Just one last poem. Would you be willing to read “Far Beyond”? It's on page 98.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Of course.

“Far Beyond”

In the vertigo treatment clinic's waiting room, there was a grandmother who would talk to anyone, and because of her, conversations blossomed.

The words we used most were

Cliff,

Bluff,

Crag,

Slope,

And ground below.

It was a list.

In the physical therapy room, we practiced how to live and not fall off precipices.

Walking on one leg, turning one's head while staying focused on a single point, standing without falling on a shaking plank, clapping to the signal while on a moving plank, lying on a bed cut up into squirming pieces, spinning one's butt while riding an exercise ball, vibrating one's whole body on a vibrating waterbed.

All these activities are far beyond doable for people standing on cliffs.

The infinity is right beneath our feet. We usually place our bodies inside fog and winds and trees and sunshine and others of the empty air, but we place our feet on the ground. But our feet, alas, are in disharmony with the ground.



The precariousness of this tiny real estate we've been granted on this earth, feeling as if we are on someone's palm, as if that is the exact amount, even that little bit that will be stolen soon from us.

As if all our present moments are leaping off the cliff every second. As if loss is ongoing.

James Shaheen: Thanks so much, Jack. Unfortunately we're out of time. Otherwise I'd ask you a million more questions, and maybe another time we can talk to you about your poetry, which I would very much. Anything else before we close?

Jack Saebyok Jung: Oh, it was excellent to talk about Kim poetry, and I hope more readers will be able to meet her amazing world and work through this volume. Thank you so much for having me.

James Shaheen: Thank you. It's such an enjoyable read. I mean, it brings up so much, and at the same time, you can just enjoy reading it without overthinking it. So Jack Jung, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Lady No*, available now. Thanks, Jack.

Jack Saebyok Jung: Thank you, James.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Jack Saebyok Jung. To read a few poems from *Lady No*, visit tricycle.org. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah

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“The Shamanic Voice of Kim Hyesoon”

Episode #152 with Jack Saebyok Jung

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Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!