



P R I N C E S S
A B A N D O N E D

Essays

K I M H Y E S O O N

TRANSLATED BY DON MEE CHOI

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This chapbook contains excerpts from
To Write as a Woman: Lover, Patient, Poet, and You
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P R E F A C E

Kim, Hyesoon is one of the most important contemporary poets in South Korea. She lives in Seoul and teaches creative writing at the Seoul Institute of the Arts. Kim began publishing in 1979 and was one of the first few women to be published in *Literature and Intellect* [*Munhak kwa jisöng*]. This journal, along with *Creation and Criticism* [*Ch'angjak kwa pip'yöng*], were the two leaders in the intellectual and literary movement against the U.S.-backed military dictatorships of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan in the 1970s and '80s. Kim began to receive critical recognition in the late 1990s. She believes that the recognition of her work was due to the strong emergence of women's poetry since the 1970s. Kim has won numerous literary prizes and was the first woman to receive the coveted Midang (2006) and Kim Su-yöng (1998) awards named after two major contemporary poets. Midang was a poet who stood for "pure poetry" [*sunsusi*] while Kim Su-yöng's poetry is associated with "engaged poetry" [*ch'amyösi*] that displays historical consciousness. Kim Hyesoon's poetry goes beyond the expectations of the established aesthetics and also of "female poetry" [*yöryusi*] which traditionally celebrates passive, refined language. Kim once complained to me that many of her students still approach poetry the way it has been handled in the written male-dominated tradition of Korea for many centuries. As she explained, "Whenever they see a landscape they freely carve out

what they want from it. After they cut out a part, they describe it and then add aphorisms.” Instead she provokes her students, “Why don’t you write about the video games you play?” Kim writes in the context of Korea’s highly patriarchal society, a nation that is still under neocolonial rule by the U.S.

In her book of essays, *To Write as a Woman: Lover, Patient, Poet, and You*, Kim makes radical connections between contemporary women’s writing and a Korean shaman narrative [*muga*] called the Abandoned [*paridaegi*] also known as Princess Abandoned [*parigonju*]. I say radical because Kim is severing women’s writing from the written tradition of both men and women that has been regulated by men. Shaman narratives have always held a lowly position in Korean literary tradition, allocated to women and commoners, while shamans are outsiders, the lowest of the low. I say this is a rupture of a major kind, an ecstatic disruption in the orderly and calming affect of patriarchal hierarchy. Kim follows Princess Abandoned, who is banished to the world of the dead and navigates the rupture, revealing a new landscape, a landscape you can’t just “freely carve out” because it is already carved, cut dead. Hence, there is only narration of death, deathliness in death, liveliness in death.

Kim’s rupture aligns with Joyelle McSweeney’s necropastoral:

When I reframe the pastoral—already a defunct, anachronistic, dead, imperial and imperialistic literary form—as a necropastoral, I am calling attention to the excesses, intensities, inequalities,

anachronisms, morbidities already implicit in a genre contrived to represent separation, quarantine, timelessness, stasis, protection from upset and death.

—from “*Can the Necropastoral be Political?*”
www.montevidayo.com, January 31, 2011

Translation is also a rupture, a rupture from what is perceived as the original, the alive. Translation is dead, essentially bogus. I say this as a lowly translator.

. . .

DON MEE CHOI

POETRY OF HEARING

—*what is femininity?*

...

A different kind of experience is demanded of a performer of the Abandoned *paridaegi* 바리대기 than of a performer from another genre. Such experience is not the kind you can count on having or come across habitually. It comes when you are least expecting it, while it may never come to someone who intentionally seeks it out. It soars like poetic inspiration. Inevitably, the performer of the Abandoned is expected to have the experience of “hearing” the spirits of the dead who are called ghosts, spirits, or gods, in addition to having the experience of going through a penance within a life of ordeal, suffering from shaman-sickness, or undergoing with her own body a world of illusions. Without this “hearing” she is not qualified to be a performer of the Abandoned.

Then where does the spirit come from to possess a human being at a certain moment? Does it stay “outside” then take over someone (a woman in particular), the performer-to-be who is so overcome with resentment that she has roamed the netherworld and is moaning from her illness? Or is the spirit something that gushes out from someone’s insides—someone who is ill and in severe pain, a recurring illness that can’t be diagnosed or treated by modern medicine—like a virus, like love, or something that is called ghost because it is nameless?

The performer cannot develop her body and soul, her life as the performer of the Abandoned, without making contact with ghosts. The performer exists as a twin-like being, who is intertwined with death, the death she was able to name through her active participation in it, and she uses this ability to visit back and forth with the death everyone harbors. She attains her ability as a performer of death through her own life's suffering, the naming of her suffering which is like death, the metaphorical naming of the metonymic. In other words, making contact with her own spirit allows her to communicate with other spirits through the bodies of the others and enables her to guide the spirits of the dead to a safe place (?) in the netherworld at the request of her regulars.

At this time, inside the connection made with the spirit through her hearing, she-self and the performer-self understand more deeply the social reality they have encountered. And among the many dead she needs to guide to the netherworld are those in particular who have met unjust deaths; thus, she is able to expand her existential sphere through her contacts with them. At the same time, the performer begins a strange communal life with the ghosts that exist in the lives of the many regulars who come to see her. That is to say, as the performer narrates her text of the Abandoned inside the new relations she has established with her regulars, she weaves every day the new warp and woof that give birth to a new version of the narrative. What distinguishes the text of the Abandoned from other fables and theatrical texts is that it exposes a different

approach—the fact that the lives of the other, the audience, the regulars are incorporated into the performance sphere and are woven into the text. Therefore, every time the Abandoned is narrated, we can see writing that is created in an inverse fashion—that draws upon the other (the reader) and becomes incorporated into the text. Inside such truth, I think we can discern a new approach to reading and how a feminine text appropriates.

...

I think a woman-poet *yôsôngsiin* 여성시인 experiences a certain symbolic process like the one experienced by the performer of the Abandoned. For example, unless the poet acknowledges or constructs the reality of her own feminine *yôsôngjôk* 여성적 life, she only has moments of existence that belong to someone else's reality. At the moment of such realization, the poet learns that she is sick and that she must name the death that comes with her sickness. And with her sick body, she goes through the vortex of life as well as death. Then, at some point in time, the poet experiences "hearing the femininity *yôsôngsông* 여성성." If the poet never reaches this stage of "hearing the femininity," she cannot really be the woman-poet she has named herself to be. At the moment of "hearing" the poet can name the experiences she has had thus far as well as the moments of her symbolic processes, and the record of them becomes her poetry. Then the books of such poetry are the records of the process of pulling out life from death, thereby opening the horizon of the poet's life with death, like the way the boundary between

life and death is mashed inside the performance-space, a space which is established when the performer of the Abandoned hears the spirits of the dead who have met unjust deaths and then intermixes the spheres of life and death that belong to her and her regulars. Therefore, each book of poems by the woman-poet is a metonymic performance-space of the poet's "hearing the femininity," the Abandoned performance-ground.

. . .

When the woman-poet experiences hearing the femininity, she begins to hear the sounds of the inside. . . . At this time, she acknowledges the existence of a voice of the inside that is different from her practical reality. She is overcome with anxiety as well as happiness as she begins to hear the voice of the inside. And she begins to realize that she stands at the center of death rather than at the center of life and that she cannot maintain her life if she does not embrace death. . . . She feels as if all of the outside is entering the inside like the way ghosts rush up to the performer. She begins to read differently all the undertones of the symbolic things outside of her. She also reads differently the lives of the women who have gone ahead of her. She begins to realize that the foundation of feminine existence is found somewhere different from here, somewhere very remote. Then a nameless sickness visits her. . . . She feels a different part of herself that fights with the part that denies the things that exist inside her. This brings her deeper pain. She despairs that her tongue cannot fully depict this fight. However, at some point she realizes that she must embrace the inside's death; unless

she accepts it, she will not be able to accept her own reality. Then she reaches a point where she can name her death. She accepts the conception of death with its intensity akin to painful childbirth. At that moment, somewhere within her, she can feel a sense of opening of a women's world that has the hearing of death. She is hearing the femininity. . . . In the world of hearing, she learns that she is more conversational and performative. In the numerous repetitions of the symbolic processes, the going back and forth between the inside and the outside, through this spiral process, she discards the identity imposed upon her and begins to feel the transformed identity she now has—the identity coded by a different method that can only be named within the connection with death.

. . .

INSPIRATION

—*the abandoned woman writes the abandoned woman*

Sometime ago this story got around. A girl who lived in a high-rise apartment building was staring out the window and made eye contact momentarily with someone outside the window. It didn't take her long to realize that what just happened was an impossible thing in a high-rise—making direct eye contact with someone through the glass window. The girl was startled and looked down below. Then she recognized the woman on the ground who had just fallen to her death. The moment the girl understood what had just taken place, she went mad from an unknowable fear. I cannot verify whether this story is true or not, except that there was a time when such stories about death, stories of witnessing death, were circulating among us.

If that moment when the girl made eye contact with someone outside the window, diving towards death, were to be captured by the world of language and given a name, it might be called "the moment of poetic inspiration." For a poet, inspiration exists as the end (not the beginning) reached by imagination, which is triggered at the very instant the poet makes eye contact with her own existence. That is to say, inspiration is a poet's clairvoyance of her distant future. Then what was the look of that being the girl momentarily gazed at? What else could it be but the girl's own death plunging from

the rooftop of the building to the hard ground, the
absence *pujae* 부재 opened up?

. . .

The first half paragraph of the Abandoned *Paridegi* narrative, despite its many versions, they all have this common element:

A couple gets married.
And they have six daughters.
Their seventh daughter is also a girl,
so they discard her.

The abandoned seventh daughter is *Paridegi*. Of course, the “abandonment motif” is most common in narratives that handle the life of a heroine. However, the abandonment motif in the Abandoned goes beyond the rites-of-passage themes that are characteristic of a heroine myth as it raises a particular issue. And that is that the child is abandoned for the sole reason of being a girl. This motif of the Abandoned exposes women’s condition under patriarchy, but it also shows a situation that arises from a tragic bond of sympathy—as an abandoned woman, she becomes conscious of her own femininity or gains an existential awareness of the fact that she has no choice but to abandon a girl-child even though she is a woman herself.

The woman-poet’s inspiration is a device that substitutes the self that has been abandoned in this world with something uniquely creative, a device that simultaneously embraces the abandoned child and validates the self that must raise the child. It could also be words that refer to the act of falling into “death that is alive”

like a shaman who goes through a journey of rescuing a dead child every day. Therefore, for a woman-poet inspiration is different from that of a man-poet—his abstract gaze of death, his journey of a transparent space; hers is of a different space that names the “hearing” of every day. There is always something inside the death or nothingness *mu* 無 that the woman-poet gazes into. This is akin to the Eastern philosophy’s investigation of nothingness in which the notion of “absolute nothing” does not exist. The cries of the abandoned child echo vividly inside the journey the woman-poet is pulled into by feminine inspiration. At that moment, the death of “I” transcends death and goes somewhere over there, to meet another “I” of a dead child. . . .

Even now, inside the performance-space of the Abandoned where its text is produced differently, I give birth to another text of the Abandoned that has split off from yet another version, a version among countless versions. Another *Paridegi* has endured life and death. But the child quickly returns to her place. The days of the white sheets of paper greeting me with nothing written on them persists. I tremble from having met my own absence.

From somewhere far inside me, a child cries.

. . .

S P A C E

—*the reason why she went to the
Buddhist Elysium sôyôk 서역*

Women's poetry is treated as women's pre-modern literature such as instructional songs *kyubanggasa* 규방가사, the three-line poem *sijo* 시조, correspondence between women *naegan* 내간, and biographical essays, but I think that women's poetry has many more connections with oral literature that has been transmitted discreetly from mouth to mouth before it was written down, such as folksongs *sokyo* 속요, ancient songs *kodaegayo* 고대가요 by nameless authors, or women's shaman-songs *muga* 무가—"the Abandoned" *paridaegi*. These songs that have affinity with women's poetry avoided "transcription" and, therefore, it was probably easier to establish space in them for women's secret desires or feminine exchange. . . . Shaman-songs have developed through women, inside the rituals for women. However, inside the women's shaman-songs, from time to time, depending on the circumstance, there are numerous marks of erosion made by patriarchal ideology. Nevertheless, shaman-songs contain many, many desires and experiences of women's consciousness and unconsciousness. . . . Each shaman-song is the same, is the same inside a different shaman-song, yet another woman's experience is added on and another song is created and interpreted once again. Inside each different version, each woman's sovereignty arises, and

the experiential content of the sovereignty exposes the political. Therefore, at a place where the Abandoned is sung, the different female protagonists of the numerous texts of the Abandoned discreetly promote the practice of feminine discourse. I like all the many texts of the Abandoned and the multiple forms of its dispersal. (I hope that this writing of mine will also take such form.)

As in other heroine myths, *Paridegi* is abandoned as soon as she is born. She is abandoned in the animals' cage, back hill, backyard, marsh, sea of blood and such, and the abandonment doesn't stop after this first phase. She goes through a terrible abandonment up to three times in the stream, *Hwangch'ôn* River, sea of blood, East Sea, deep inside the mountain beyond the *Ch'ôngch'ôn* River, even inside a mountain cave. The abandoned *Paridegi* is raised by cranes, magpies, turtles, Good-deed Granny and Grandpa, Sea Dragon God, Mountain God, Buddha, etc. There is even a version of the text that says that her parents took her back to raise her and were abusive to her. Anyway, *Paridegi* grows up thinking that she is an orphan. The place in which *Paridegi* is abandoned is an unreal space, and all those who raise her are unreal characters. The spaces in which she is abandoned are places where graves are made or where the dead are secretly discarded. Hence, when her foster parents find *Paridegi* as an infant, insects fall out from her eyes, ears, mouth, and nose. . . .

The journey of *Paridegi*'s abandonment can be read as the process of how, in the pre-modern period, women's consciousness placed deep inside women came to be externalized. We can learn from this that the women in those times understood their births and lives as a journey

of death. The women within and without the text of the Abandoned accept the dimensions of life and death as a reality where the two are not distinguished. They accept that to live is to die and to die is to live. They might even have thought that to die is better than to live. Such thinking probably enabled them to ignore and disperse their fears and anxieties about the space of death.

Along this line of thought, it then becomes possible to explain why the women-poets of South Korea enjoy overlapping the space of the real with the space of illusions in order to express a different dimension outside of the reality's system and rules or in other words, what exists behind the crack of reality. In other words, the illusory space contained in the poetry of women-poets is based not on the notion of the unreal or that such space is unreal, but on the idea that it is a space that has constructed a different psychological reality based on the unconsciousness of the abandoned children. In order to express their problematic identities, women-poets fabricate images of their space and, from inside the newly made images, they pull out the voices of their newly transformed selves. This is why women-poets take the readers and stand them in front of the gap of the world, the crevice of death.

...

The Buddhist Elysium that *Paridegi* visits is the space of death that exists inside life. People come to know that they are alive inside death by experiencing the journey of *Paridegi*'s space of death mediated by a shaman. *Paridegi*'s father came to know the same thing. He was dead through death. At that instance,

the medicinal water *Paridegi* brought him, the poison, the gift of that realization, is what saved him inside death.

Lao-tzu referred to this state of being alive inside the space of death as nothingness *mu* and called it *hyônbin* 현빈. *Hyôn* is something closed, something black. Eyes are closed, so everything is black. It refers to being in a state of death. *Wang-p'il*, the Chinese scholar of the Wei Kingdom (220-265), said that *hyôn* was a state of shedding the decorative, the excess of all things. And *-bin* signifies a woman's reproductive organs, the mouth of a metal lock, a valley. The place that *Paridegi* goes to, travelling through death, is an empty place because it is a feminine space. It is *hyônbin*. All things are alive and all relics exist because of this empty space. All the possibilities of life are contained in this dark uterus. Here, the androcentrism of patriarchy breaks, the identity of all things breaks. Here, "the body becomes marginalized, yet the body is preserved" according to Lao-tzu.

...

For Lao-tzu women and children signify morals to 道. A child's body is a soft lump, its gender indistinguishable (I think that if Lao-tzu were born now he would have also mentioned bisexuality) and a woman, unlike a man, does not possess anything. She embraces all things and nurtures them, and like a door that opens and closes on its own, she reflects everything, yet is empty like a black (closed) mirror at the very bottom. This mirror does not imprison anything. It would not want life even if it were offered to it. A woman, the empty darkness, does not follow the logic of ownership. She cannot. Instead everything

is reflected to the woman, the darkness. The gender-indistinguishable child perishes in this place, but at the same time a path of revived life opens up. The darkness gives birth, nurtures, and gives birth again and possesses nothing, acts but does not boast, raises the child but does not control it. *Paridegi's* Buddhist Elysium is this black mirror. In it *Paridegi's* journey continues through her return to the darkness, to the death that is alive, to the unconscious.

I, a woman-poet, on the road of darkness, the endless road of the text, follow the sound of the inspiration outside of my insides like *Paridegi* who roams the Buddhist Elysium. I break and break apart the darkness I have entered. This is how I can leave here and return to the place I had left. Each gap along my walk, each valley gets filled with me. I always sink into the hollow spaces between the fractured text. I gush out from the hollow and get dispersed with other things that have also gushed out from the hollow. The dispersed things break once again. This doesn't mean that the text of my body, the text of my language is prophetic or mysterious. If it were mysterious, I could never do the work of fracturing the space of the real.

...

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

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Her translations include *When the Plug Gets Unplugged* (Tinfish, 2005), *Anxiety of Words* (Zephyr, 2006), *Mommy Must be a Fountain of Feathers* (Action Books, 2008), and *All the Garbage of the World, Unite!* (Action Books, 2011). She lives and works in Seattle.

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