

East Asian Journal of Popular Culture
Volume 7 Number 1

© 2021 Intellect Ltd Book Review. English language.
https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00045_5

I HEAR YOUR VOICE, YOUNG-HA KIM (2017) (TRANS. KRYS LEE)

New York: Mariner Books, 272 pp.,
ISBN 978-0-544-32447-3, p/bk, \$13.99

Reviewed by Jed Lea-Henry, Vignan University

LOST IN TRANSLATION

The greatest fear of any writer is that they will never be read. Once exorcized, there comes a new fear – only slightly less concerning than the former – that the *words* will die before *they* do. It has all the terror of aging dementia – waking up each morning with a weakening idea of who you once were, sensing a change in the faces of people around you. Everyone continues to smile, but it is all increasingly mechanical – you struggle manfully, but there is a persistent tide, receding by the day. The tragedy, of course, is made all the greater if the decline is, in any way, artificial – if your nurses are slipping something into your tea each day, resubmerging you in the fog just before you can shake your head free, and find yourself again.

‘A motorcycle takes on different styles for different drivers’, writes Kim Young-ha in *I Hear Your Voice* (169), ‘Taeju’s driving was like an effortless, dash-ing cursive’. As he always does, Kim takes the reader into a world of the avidly disaffected, the numbly romantic: a slave labourer (*Black Flower*), a North Korean spy (*Your Republic Is Calling You*), most famously a suicide consultant (*I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*) and now a motorcycle outlaw (*I Hear Your Voice*). This style of writing is all about musing on details – a focus on small peculiarities that make the characters seem distinct: a girl that does not drink water, an internal security agent addicted to pornography and now a gang leader with a Jesus complex.

But Kim’s literary style involves a deeper, and more calculated, muddying of waters. His goal is simple: find a mildly appealing story, darken it up as much as possible without destroying the flow of things and then linger on those alienated character details longer and with more subtlety than anyone else has the foresight to do. It is a picture of the commonplace, smudged with purpose – in just such a way – so as to amplify the underlying image; abstract art. A baby is born ... and immediately left to die; it survives and is adopted ... into a brothel; soon the boy is abandoned to live alone ... as the only resident in a suburb pending demolition; he is eventually sent to an orphanage in the countryside ... next to a dog farm that burns to the ground; he returns to Seoul ... and chooses to live on the streets despite other options; he finds comfort and release in riding motorcycles ... only to become the leader of the largest biker gang in Korea.

‘I only want to draw out morbid desires, imprisoned deep in the unconscious. This lust, once freed, starts growing. The caller’s imagination runs

free, and she soon discovers her potential', narrates the suicide entrepreneur in Kim's big moment of literary recognition, *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (9). It is an extraordinary flow of writing: understated, short and yet so well conceived and paced, that it should make anyone, with any sort of literary ear, jealous. The world should be full of people wishing they had rounded on the idea first, then had the courage to not back away sheepishly and the good sense to not overreach in its execution. Boldness and subtlety, in just the right measure, was Kim Young-ha's formal introduction to the world of Korean English literature. And this much has remained unchanged.

The thrill of the road is not a new theme for Kim. It emerges in fine detail in much of his earlier writing, always as a form of self-expression. It is never really about *driving* at all, rather the rediscovery of a primal self, the clawing back of lost personal significance. The author uses similarly re-occurring themes of sexual deviancy and – to a lesser degree – violence in much the same way; they are presented unexpectedly to the reader – unusual, sudden and dangerous. With *I Hear Your Voice*, Kim flirts a little too closely with an exhausted topic. 'Gang books' are a dime-a-dozen, and lifting the veil on the allure of the motorcycle is similarly well worn. How seamlessly a sentence like '[i]t was obvious that he was a man who marched through life to the rhythms of some drum I would never hear' would fit into this book as a description of the orphaned gang leader Jae; rather, as it was used in 1966 by Hunter S. Thompson in *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (224).

'A man who has blown all his options can't afford the luxury of changing his ways. He has to capitalize on whatever he has left, and he can't afford to admit – no matter how often he's reminded of it – that every day of his life takes him farther and farther down a blind alley', again Hunter S. Thompson (226). This is the challenge that Kim Young-ha is up against here. His style of prose does not pop or catch the eye (and never has); only his observations do. It is less glamorous and carries a greater risk of failure, but for Kim it mostly works – the reader never gets too lost in the beauty of the language, and so is free to get lost in the everyday minutiae of the narrative.

And there is a story – of some originality – to be told here. Korean motorcycle gangs do not fit the image of the Hell's Angels that most people will be immediately able to recall. Of course, the Koreans are still 'outlaws' in the strictest definition of the word, but it is all a little cleaner, sadder and less idealistic. The picture of the Angels, as painted by Thompson, were of men (and women) falling into a crack being exposed by a changing America. Free from war and hardship, it was a society becoming uniform and regimented. The Angels were those who chose not to fit: sleeping in the dirt, living only to ride and scraping their pennies to buy cheap beer, simply because the alternative seemed worse. Not extortionists or mobsters, they shared much the same drive as that of an outdoorsman living off-the-grid.

On the streets of Seoul, these outlaws are younger, less sure of themselves and with one foot still inside the world they are rebelling against. Thompson wrote, '[t]here is an important difference between the words "losers" and "outlaw". One is passive and the other is active' (232). Thompson's characters are outlaws; Kim's are losers: the underemployed and the poorly paid young men delivering takeaway food to tired families. *I Hear Your Voice* is a bright light to the atomization of modern life, the superficiality, the rough indifference, the futility of striving, along with the smell of nihilism in the air. It is a look at the people underneath the neon glow. Kim Young-ha does for Korean

1. Michel Houellebecq is a French author, poet and essayist known for his nihilistic form and subject matter, as well as the controversy that surrounds his work. Houellebecq writes on the changes and meaninglessness that modernity has forced into French life.

life what Michel Houellebecq does for French and European.¹ From *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* onward, Kim never drops the theme of a manic society running breathlessly away from happiness, in the hope of a little more happiness: 'I read novels when I am traveling, but I don't read them in Seoul. Novels are food for the leftover hours of life, the in-between times, the moments of waiting' (6).

In the absence of drug use and violently deferred status, these Korean losers drive. And so it takes on an outweighed significance, becoming the defining characteristic of who they are. They meditate on the nuances of technique: 'I thrived on pure speed. According to Jae, I had an aggressive driving style. But Jae, he literally became one with his motorcycle' (141), and see police restrictions as more than just inconveniences: '[t]he game changed further when the courts deemed motorcycles an accessory to crime and began confiscating them. For the teenage bikers, having their motorcycles confiscated equalled losing their entire inheritance' (259). It is hard not to get pleasantly lost in the details of this lifestyle and the nature of their rebellion. The mythology is readymade, the gang phenomenon being as popular – and attractive – in Korean cinema as anywhere else in the world. The element of speed, the road and the promise of pure – if transitory – freedom offers enough to lure in even the most casual driver. Who among us has not pressed the accelerator a little too hard? Turned a corner with a little too much abandon? And felt that overdue animal release, the excited scream of their own inner gangster?

If Kim had left things here, perhaps the coming crash might not have occurred. *I Hear Your Voice* is desperate to impart an explicit moral lesson. But the lesson is always the same: guilt, loss and sadness come from shared moments, and so the pain should also be shared. When isolated in a single consciousness, normal social structures collapse and detachment becomes a protection, only to be shocked open by the unexpected and the inexcusable:

In a space where the only code of conduct toward strangers was indifference, a strange, sudden shame seized them. In the new-born baby's cry was a spell that hit each individual's guilty conscious.

(9)

Ethics are like an embankment. They protect you to a certain extent from an awakening, but when they collapse a flood follows.

(247)

This is all said out loud because the narrative never quite takes the reader there. And where morality will not cut it, religiosity takes its place, uncomfortably so. To be clear, it is not the invocation of religion itself, but the forced, new-age, scattergun way Kim builds up the aura of his protagonist Jae that is uncomfortable. This first hits the reader through repetition in otherwise casual language: devil, devil, devil; holy, holy, holy; god, god, god; spirit, spirit, spirit; soul, soul, soul. It never seems like the appropriate linguistic choice: '[i]f you lower a rope to a *soul* fallen into a pit, and the *soul* didn't have the will to take the rope and climb, all that effort was wasted' (100, emphases added). Before long it is everywhere, and Jae is looking at dogs and 'entering their souls'. Surrounded by 'dozens of kids', revering him as a Jesus-type figure – all the way down to his gaunt frame, shelved appearance and off-base sexual

appeal – because they ‘sensed that Jae identified with their suffering’, our gang leader offers advice like this concerning the choice of licence plates:

Numbers that came in integers of three – 3, 6, 9, and 15 – were holy.
(128)

In a not-so-subtle nod to Jesus again:

The first time they laughed; the second, they approached him; the third they paid attention. Then, silently, they began to follow him.
(128)

When his fellow criminals need emotional counselling, Jae tells them:

You don’t need to run [...] You’re the centre of the universe.
(120)

Or offers miniature lessons in Buddhism:

‘Siddhartha also left home as a teenager’
‘Siddhartha? Who’s that?’ Mokran asked
‘Buddha’
‘So Buddha was a person first?’
‘He was once a teenager, like us’.
(132)

And Native American wisdom:

I heard the cube’s voice as I was coming down the stairs. It said it was ashamed [Jae says to Mokran, the romantic pivot of the book].
They [Native-Americans] didn’t have any concept of money – they were directly connected to the objects around them. The act of accepting money to work blocked you from your awareness. That’s why you couldn’t hear the cube’. Mokran is later assured that: ‘Your bike likes you too’.
(124)

This is hard to take seriously. Remember at this point that this is a teenage boy, speaking to other teenage boys (and a few girls). It all feels like a middle-age writer’s idea of what youth is. Surely Mokran would have grown tired of this drivel after the first conversation, and a much more straightforward, rough and, above all else, silent gang member would have overthrown Jae the very moment he began talking about growing angelic wings. Not many criminal enterprises survive on sensitivity. Worse, this is not the way to communicate nihilism, hopelessness and guilt in a novel. Being overly expressive negates the underlying emotion – you simply have to show it. And when Kim does, he is at his best.

I Hear Your Voice, as with all of Kim Young-ha’s writing, hits its peak with sex and violence; life on the fringes. Rather than dwelling on the pulled seams of family tragedy – as is so common in Korean, and indeed East Asian, literature – Kim steps boldly into perversion, hedonism and cruelty. Echoing back to the group sex between the middle-age wife and two university students

in *Your Republic Is Calling You*, the reader here is grabbed uncomfortably by a scene of a girl with an intellectual disability, Hanna, tied up and tortured for sex and enjoyment, her 'leaking body fluids' and the Stockholm syndrome she feels when Jae frees her ('you better run away fast before the others come. Quick!' [99]). Demanding to be retied to the chair where her captor left her, she explains: 'I love him. Because he loves me, he's doing this. I can bear it. Tie me up again'; '[s]he kept stubbornly whining, then she cried. She began to hit Jae. She stank of urine' (99).

There is – ordinarily – no place for sad recollection and common-place moral sentiment in Kim's writing. Thinking back, 'they might be tormenting Hanna even worse than before. But that didn't make Jae feel helpless; he actually felt stronger. His changing self, a growing seed in solitary confinement at the orphanage, was becoming more solid' (104). And the authorities following behind these crimes are violent and inhumane in their own way:

[T]he police force is less like a vampire and more like a zombie. It doesn't pay attention to what others think. It doesn't need attention, and doesn't rely on its charisma. Instead it creeps along tenaciously in pursuit of its goals. And when it goes in for the kill, it jumps in and breaks every bone.

(182)

Kim's world shocks and attracts in equal measure, like the discovery of a hidden camera in your bathroom broadcasting live to the internet. You are being exposed, but what hurts is that now people can see you as you really are; all pretence stripped away. And in that painful emotion, '[o]nly violence could expel the inner darkness'. Every page in *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* hugs close to this vision, and so the characters build themselves up as real through their oddities and flaws. This time, however, the trick does not seem to catch. Everything is a little rushed, undercooked and impatient. As the narrative is still developing, Mokran is asked out-of-the-blue whether she remembers a chance and fleeting encounter with Jae at a train station (up until that point their only meeting):

It's weird, I keep wondering about him [...] you know, he's the first to get a hold of my number and not call me.

(111)

And the reason for the two male lead characters to reunite for the first time since childhood:

I saw you in a dream last night.

(115)

Introducing a rival, in love and violence:

Jae asks, 'Who's Taeju?'
'He's the leader of the coolest biker gang. Also my ex-boyfriend',
Mokran casually replies.

(139)

And to add a little philosophical depth:

I remember how as a kid I'd make shadows when the lights had gone out in the house, my hand becoming a wolf or a rabbit. Maybe Jae was one of the shadows I'd made.

(152)

This is lazy. None of these moments are, in any way, believable; and worse, they make the reader ask themselves an unpleasant question – *what does the author take me for?* The language is empty, and the internal worlds of the characters' hustle forward on serendipity and karmic importance. Though Kim's prose has never lit fires in literary hearts, it also has never been a chore to get through – formidably, and successfully, plain; ordinarily a vanilla background allowing his characters to rise with flavour – deep and plausible. Now, the fundamental details of who they are, and the interconnectedness of their lives, is outlandish and convenient. The story is hurried along implausibly before our eyes, and so the characters never connect as they should, and everything begins to feel a little sterile and numb. The personalities in Kim Young-ha's novels have always been dispassionate, but he has always opened them up and sold them to his audience, through a slow, paused and passionate exploration of that dispassion. With *I Hear Your Voice*, the opposite becomes true – the longer you saunter and poke around, the more agitated you become.

Although blame for this must sit with the author, we are treading strange ground here – we are dealing with translations. As you read forward, with the characters never discovering themselves, and their interplay frozen and emotionless, a much more uncomfortable thought begins to arise. Kim's reputation is based on his previous novels, and what separates his previous novels from this one is the hiring of a different Korean-to-English translator.

The punctuation is poorly suited and the dialogue never fits with the language of the mind, and so the story never touches the ear as it should – like a mundane sitcom, everything is there, but the polish and the consideration is missing. Clive James once explained the writing process as 'turn[ing] a phrase until it catches the light' (241). A progression of diligent error correction. Beleaguered by lazy tricks of semiconscious language, *I Hear Your Voice* rings like a first draft, hastily written, not edited and pumped out to meet a deadline like a newspaper article. Whenever a significant span of time is mentioned, it is referred to as 'ages'; every time someone is emotionally upset, they are having a 'fit': 'she threw a fit', 'he threw a fit'. And how uncooked and childishly naïve do the linguistic choices of 'hurt his head' and 'dazzling manoeuvres' sound in what should be these dangerous and highly fraught situations:

One of the traffic officers was chasing down a motorcycle crew and hurt his head when he rolled onto the concrete.

Jae avoided the patrol cars with his dazzling manoeuvres.

(209)

Or the clear misuse of the word 'pursuing', intended to simply mean 'behind':

The son ran out of the house and stole a car parked in front of a restaurant. Around four in the morning he crashed into seven parallel-parked cars and was arrested by the police. He had been driving drunk without a license, and the taxi driver *pursuing* him was injured and hospitalised.

(73, emphasis added)

There are so many basic glitches in language, and glaring mistakes, that the reader is often taken out of the story and forced to consider for themselves what is intended, rather than just what is before them. The final judgement on this? Indifference and neglect. Sentences are frequently missing basic punctuation:

This new Seungtae[,] who wasn't considered gay by any of his family members or friends[,] explored the sexual identity buried deep inside him.

(165, emphases added)

This kid was more disgusted by[,] than afraid of[,] Seungtae, as if he wasn't even worth hating.

(183, emphases added)

And there is no discernible regard for the literary clang of certain word selections and their place in the sentence (highlighted in italics below by this reviewer):

Even Seungtae, who had *encountered countless* numbers of gangs.

(207, emphasis added)

In a space where the only code of conduct toward strangers was indifference, a *strange, sudden shame* seized them.

(9, emphasis added)

Slowly their movements subsided. Their bodies, dangerously entwined, straightened. *Like* a dog shaking rain off his coat, they noisily tidied up and, one at a time, exited. It was *like* a theatre. One actor appeared after the other, passionately delivered his or her lines, then walked off the stage.

(23, emphases added)

Kim's translator for this novel, and the person ultimately responsible for such errors (in English), is Kryss Lee. And throwing blame downstream in this way might seem a little more like scapegoating if it was not for Lee's own body of work for comparison. Her only full-length novel to date, *How I Became a North Korean* is a book well conceived and with obvious marketability. The trouble is that it has the same undercooked, first draft and trundling nature to it – a litany of unintended blunders. And the same final – hollowed-out, empty-charactered, disregard for the reader's intelligence or literary appreciation – feel.

The place of translators in the world of fiction represents a moral hazard of sorts. They are rewarded with their name on the cover and are paid regularly by each sale, but do not risk the same downsides in the event of the failure of the novel to sell. The author always suffers much greater damage to their reputation, if indeed the translator suffers at all. Both are coming at the same enterprise from such different directions: the author careful, and risk-averse, editing away to tedium; the translator pushing things out to publication as quickly as possible. But, maybe, it is an employee's market out there at the

moment, because Kim Young-ha's next book, a collection of short stories – *Diary of a Murderer*, due to be released in early 2019 – once again uses Krys Lee for its English translation. Someone is not getting what they think they are out of this relationship.

So, this is the difficult space in which we are now forced to look upon the recent work of South Korea's most intriguing, and internationally appealing, novelist. From *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*, to *Black Flower*, *Your Republic Is Calling You* and *I Hear Your Voice*, Kim Young-ha is always bold in his subject matter. And then through the slow play of language, a look inward at the peculiarities of everyday life – those moments in which we lose and find ourselves – he makes the outlandish become universal. He is 'bird-watching' on city streets. The fringe and barbaric personalities of his characters become our own – and we all love stories about ourselves, even if they are painful. An author that sees more than his audience, Kim has always drawn our eyes to what we know is there, but fail to recognize. Now he is a writer of diminishing results and fading pomp – in the years to come, when people start to turn on the literary talent of Kim Young-ha, they will look back at *I Hear Your Voice* as the moment it all came unstuck.

The fifth, and final, section of this book is by far the most compelling. It is also the one that borders most successfully on non-fiction (all the way down to the inclusion of a letter in a third-party voice). An intriguing end to a flat novel and an instructive look at the unique place that Kim Young-ha has managed to chisel for himself in the Korean literary scene – 'writers are more interested in a life they feel able to write about than in representing the sheer variety of lives' (225).

'An officer fully knows his identity only by encountering the public', and similarly novels like this are designed to push up closer to the dirt and grime of society so that we can then get a better glimpse of ourselves. Returning from holiday, and speaking in the author's own voice, Kim details what writing this book did to him: '[s]ummer was coming to an end, and tourists returning from their travels waited for taxis at Incheon International Airport, holding duty-free shopping bags'; 'I got in, started the car, and returned home. As I exited the airport expressway and entered Seoul, I began spotting motorcycles. Delivery service men in black helmets and protective gear sped ahead as soon as the lights changed'. *I Hear Your Voice* does this same thing to the reader – suddenly you are awake to the crime, the hopelessness and the engines around you.

REFERENCES

- James, Clive (2008), *May Week Was in June: More Unreliable Memoirs*, London: Picador.
- Kim, Young-ha (2007), *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (trans. Chi-Young Kim), New York: Harcourt Books.
- Kim, Young-ha (2010), *Your Republic Is Calling You* (trans. Chi-Young Kim), New York: Mariner Books.
- Kim, Young-ha (2013), *Black Flower* (trans. Charles La Shure), New York: Mariner Books.
- Kim, Young-ha (2019), *Diary of a Murderer: And Other Stories* (trans. Krys Lee), New York: Mariner Books.
- Lee, Krys (2017), *How I Became a North Korean*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Thompson, Hunter S. (1966), *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, New York: Random House.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jed Lea-Henry is an Australia-born academic. After graduating from La Trobe University with majors in political science and philosophy, Jed completed his postgraduate education in international relations at Deakin University. His research has covered a broad range of topics, including Korean studies, humanitarian intervention, civil conflict, violence prevention, regional development and moral philosophy. Jed is currently an assistant professor in humanities and social sciences at Vignan University and the host of the Korea Now Podcast (<https://korea-now-podcast.libsyn.com/>). You can follow his work or contact him directly at <http://www.jedleahenry.org/> and <https://twitter.com/JedLeaHenry>.

Contact: Vignan University, Vadlamudi, Guntur 522213, Andhra Pradesh, India.
E-mail: jedlea_sh@vignan.ac.in

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6890-0257>

Jed Lea-Henry has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
