

Book Review

All the Garbage of the World Unite
(Action Books, 2011)

Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers
(Action Books, 2008)

Princess Abandoned (TinFish Press, 2012)

By Kim Hyesoon

All translated by Don Mee Choi

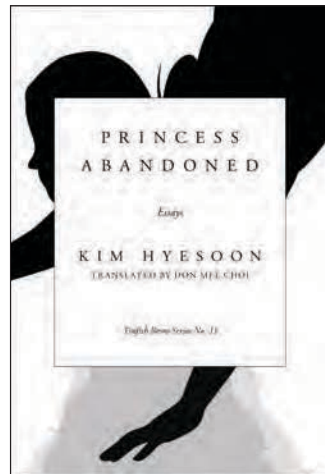
Review by Zen Master Bon Hae

They are rummaging through the corpses. Those who ignite and hold the torchlights. Outside our sleep, the roads are wet from the rain, and they tear off our nametags . . . Eyeglasses pile up with eyeglasses . . . Babies with babies who are thrown out into the future far, far, away . . .¹

Kim Hyesoon (in the Asian tradition, “Kim” is her family name) is an extraordinary Korean poet blessed with an equally extraordinary translator in the Korean-American poet Don Mee Choi.

A poet of astonishing power, Kim does not turn her gaze from things most of us try desperately not to look at, from the realities of political oppression to the realities of the body: *Our skin melts, so anyone can look into anyone’s intestines. Toilets also overflow in dreams . . . Now, I throw salt at you—what little is left of you—inside my heart.*² She writes powerfully as a woman from a place of female powerlessness. This cosmopolitan writer, who so easily invokes Western philosophy and global tragedies, is deeply influenced by Buddhism and shamanism. There are a number of online reviews of and homages to her work, which is rich enough that no two people seem to see the same Kim Hyesoon. What I want to draw your attention to here is Kim writing as a woman in a nation with a long Confucian history of prescribed women’s roles—a nation with deep Buddhist and shamanistic roots.

“Not every Asian country is steeped in Buddhist tradition. I was rather raised in a Christian environment. I think Buddhism is more than



a religion, it is first a process of discipline, and Buddha is one who has gained wisdom rather than being a god. In my poetry, I enjoy making fun of Buddha.” This is Kim Hyesoon, in an interview that appeared in conjunction with the *Poetry Parnassus* festival in London, a month before the 2012 Olympics.

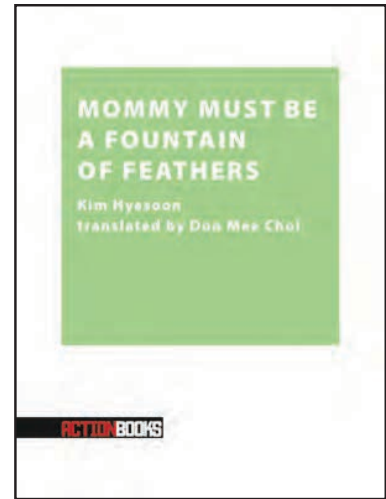
She does not claim Buddhism, but her poems are saturated with Buddhist references: bodhisattvas, asuras, bits and pieces of Buddhist folktales and, of course, the Buddha himself. These are not superficial references. As Jonathan Stalling says in his online review of her work in the journal *LIST*, her poems create “portraits of a vast samsara sea inhabited by countless sentient beings in various forms of death and rebirth [which] appear page after page.”

In the Koryo period (918–1392), and through the first hundred years or so of the Choson, upperclass women had a literary presence. But as Confucianism took hold, from around the middle of the 16th century, women were actively discouraged from learning Chinese—the language of Korean literature—and their poetry, if written down (much of it was oral), was written in hangul and only circulated privately. Women were effectively kept out of the literary tradition.

In the early 20th century, when women began again to have a public poetic presence, they were shunted into using a passive, “feminine” voice. Kim, born in 1955, was a leading figure in smashing through that voice, reinventing language in order to speak from a woman’s lived experience, including the realities of birth and menstruation. But this description is inadequate to Kim’s project. Her reinvention of language is not in the service of any political or social agenda. To quote from the *Parnassus* interview again: “Poetry is language but it also lies outside the realm of language. Poetry is written in the mother tongue and yet it transcends the mother tongue.”

This transcendence is not the transcendence of the Western saint, eyes rolled up to heaven, communing with God. It is the earthy transcendence of the shaman, transcending the human by inhabiting (or, more accurately, being inhabited by) the worlds of animals, ghosts, gods, demons and the dead.

Most Korean shamans are women. They are understood to be performers, learning elaborate dances, rituals and drum patterns. But the efficacy of their performances rests on having undergone a lengthy period of physical illness and mental torment that nobody would plan or wish for. Shamans are considered low-class,



but their services were (and to some extent still are) considered necessary. Shamanism is the oldest religion in Korea by far, and this helps to explain the relatively strong emphasis in Korean Buddhism on magic and the supernatural.

In her remarkable short book of linked essays, *Princess Abandoned*, Kim links the woman shaman and the woman poet: “. . . the books of such poetry are the records of the process of pulling out life from death . . . like the way the boundary between life and death is mashed inside the performance-space [of the shaman] . . . she [the poet] 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.”

Kim’s poetry embodies this process, perhaps most starkly in her remarkable long poem *Manhole Humanity*, in which the word *hole* evokes the emptiness of Buddhism, the holes of the body and, as the translator notes, the physical situation of a bombed-out Korea after the Korean war, as the poem lurches from dream to doctor’s office to a child in a subway station to an intensive-care ward to wherever Kim is looking/remembers/attending to.

“I” is a name for a place of confinement in my body!

“I” is a name for all the things that don’t appear outside the body’s hole!³

And, two stanzas earlier, the shamanistic *Today’s dish—put several roots of hatred, add my mashed hole, and mix in shadow powder. Then boil the mixture down.*⁴

In some sense that last sentence encapsulates Kim’s project: embracing everything and boiling the mixture completely and entirely down.

This review was first published in *Galatea Resurrects* #20, May 10, 2013 (galatearesurrection20.blogspot.com)

Notes

1. From “The Saints—Mr. and Mrs. Janitor” in *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*.
2. From “When the Plug Gets Unplugged” in *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers*.
3. From *Manhole Humanity*, in *All the Garbage of the World Unite!*
4. From *Manhole Humanity*, in *All the Garbage of the World Unite!*

Book Review

The Lankavatara Sutra: Translation and Commentary

By Red Pine

Counterpoint Press, 2012

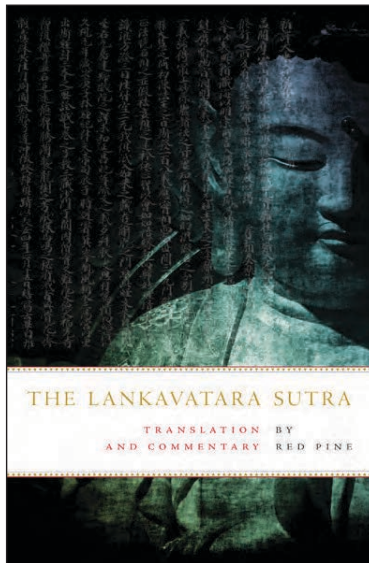
Review by Jess Row

In one of the earliest histories of Chinese Zen, the *Xu gaoseng chuan* (Transmitted Biographies of Eminent Monks) there is a famous passage about Bodhidharma:

In the beginning dhyana master Bodhidharma transmitted the four-fascicle *Lankavatara Sutra* to Huike, saying, “This sutra is the only one that is suitable for China. If you base your practice on it, you will attain salvation.”

Other entries in the same history elaborate this story, claiming that Bodhidharma’s study of the *Lankavatara* carried on for generations among the early Zen masters. Indeed, another history of early Zen is called “Record of the Teachers and Disciples of the *Lankavatara*.” On the face of this evidence, it seems fair to conclude, as Red Pine’s publishers have, that the *Lankavatara Sutra* is “the holy grail of Zen” (this phrase appears prominently on the dust jacket) or “The only Zen sutra spoken by the Buddha” (the title of the book’s press release).

Unfortunately—at least for the publicists—these claims are only a fragment of the story. Most students of Zen know that, in point of fact, there are few references to the *Lankavatara* in traditional Zen texts—and not because the sutra was lost or



somehow “hidden.” (The Chinese translations have remained in circulation from the fifth century to the present.) Even in these historical texts, there’s almost no evidence that any of the early Zen masters actually drew from the *Lankavatara* in their teachings, because no quotations from the sutra are included in their records. After an exhaustive search in his book, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*, the scholar John R. McRae concludes that “although the scripture apparently had some kind of mysterious appeal to the followers of early Zen, there is no evidence that its contents had any particular impact on the development of the school.”

So why would the eminent translator Red Pine—who’s published important new translations of the *Diamond Sutra*, teachings attributed to Bodhidharma and the complete poems of Han Shan, among many other texts—set out to translate this admittedly difficult, obscure (and long) sutra, which has no reliable Sanskrit source, and which in Chinese is full of what seem to be copying errors and other textual imperfections? In his preface, he argues that the “mysterious appeal” between Zen and the *Lankavatara*, however historically tenuous, is crucial: “[The *Lankavatara*] is unrelenting in its insistence in the primacy of personal realization and is unlike any other teaching in this regard.”

How is this so? To begin with, let’s look at the basic structure and narrative of the text. *Lankavatara* means “descent to Lanka,” that is, the island we now call Sri Lanka; the sutra tells us that the Buddha has come to Lanka to deliver teachings at the palace of

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