

Five Poems by Shin Hae-uk

Translated by Spencer LEE-LENFIELD

Introduction

We become most aware of the loneliness of our human bodies when we allow ourselves to daydream beyond their limits. Imagining what it is like to be a bat, as one famous work of philosophy muses, or to have ten eyes rather than two, or a detachable nose, or to be my best friend rather than myself—just the thought makes clear the poverty of our flesh-and-blood experience. What would it be like to be a planet? What might perception feel like, unbound from the neurology of the body as we know it? Rather than endure the torture of thinking about all the possibilities our frail little bodies foreclose from second to second, most of us choose to ignore the topic altogether.

The poetry of Shin Hae-uk (Sin Haeuk 신해옥) reads like a set of letters from someone uniquely horrified by her fellow humans' numbness to the prison of reality, and violently committed to waking up her fellow human beings to their isolation from the full range of people and objects around them. Loneliness smolders under these words, but only because their speaker hasn't yet given up the possibility of finding others who know the same loneliness. Have you ever imagined what it is like to have the ears of the house you were born in? Do you feel like your mind is a victim of your body's biochemistry? Do you hate your body, but also fear for its safety? Then these poems want you to know you are not alone—or, perhaps, they want to be alone, together, with you.

Korean critics and fellow poets have found in Shin Hae-uk's work a vibrant philosophical consciousness. Kim Juwon (Kim Chuwŏn 김주원), in a 2021 essay for the journal *Munhak p'yŏngnon* 문학평론 that won *Changbi's* (*Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏng* 創作과 批評) annual prize for literary criticism, discerns in Shin's thought experiments a form of post-humanism, an

“ontology of openness” constantly interested in displacing the poetic self. Kim Soyeon (Kim Soyŏn 김소연) points out that Shin’s willingness to mix tenses and bend the apparent limits of first-, second-, and third-person voices creates a kind of “wormhole”; “She scatters and transforms the first-person, ties the future tense together with the past—and in doing so, she aims at nothing less than expanding existence itself.” Speakers and tenses are deliberately disorienting at points, an effect that is part of the way Shin’s poetry pushes at the limits of the self. On top of all this, Shin’s poems are full of jagged corners and sudden left turns. Their language swerves from slangy to plaintive, sarcastic to elegant, electric to blue—sometimes across a single stanza break. This is not “easy” poetry. But its rewards are commensurate with its ambition to experiment. Shin Hae-uk, for all her plain-spokenness, stands in the vanguard.

Shin is innovating not just within the forms and culture of contemporary Korean verse, but in ways that challenge both contemporary poetry in the English-speaking world as well as how it views Korean poetry. Compared with the level of abstraction, imagism, and cultivated eccentricity tolerated—sometimes to excess—in the closing decades of the twentieth century, English poetry of the twenty-first century has revived exposition, formality, and often a lushness syntactic and lexical that has made it hard for translated poetry that does not share those affinities to break through to the English reader. The English literary world has tended to value and lionize Korean poets for their political clarity, from the days of Kim Jiha (Kim Chiha 김지하) as an international *cause célèbre* to Ko Ŭn’s 高銀 Nobel aspirations and, more recently, Kim Hyesoon’s (Kim Hyesun 김혜순) staunch feminist poetics. Shin’s poetry cuts across all those norms: precise, unflowery, often deliberately strange, its politics and poetics more cerebral than visceral. She stands to offer poetry worldwide so much, if readers—and publishers—will listen.

The poems in this selection come from Shin’s 2009 volume *Saengmulsŏng* 생물성 (*Biologicity*), her second collection. “Railroad” (*Reillodŭ* 레일로드) and “The House of Hansel and Gretel’s Witch Speaks” (*Henjel ŭi chip* 헨젤의 집) display Shin’s great interest in objects and peculiar speakers. “Angel” (*Ch’ŏnsa* 천사) highlights her taste in and control of enigmatic imagery, as well as the subtle rhythms she wrests from the colloquial. “GOOD MORNING” (*Kunmoning* 굿모닝) and “A Tale of Eyes” (*Nun iyagi* 눈 이야기) vibrate with the full range of mania and melancholia at this poet’s disposal—and a hint, at the end, of the costs of abnegating emotion altogether.

Railroad

1. THERE IS A TRAIN:

it's long,

and as it stretches onward,
the sunshine starts to falter.

Further
and further backward I step;
I swear I can feel the very earth.

I'm far away.

2. I AM A PERSON.

The hours dissolve
along with my smile.

But why can't I revert
back to being me,
a human back to a human?

3. I UNDERSTAND THE TRAIN.

It keeps on stretching.

Its shadow, bit by bit, grows
longer, fainter.

Between this summer and the next
there runs another summer. Lightly,
horribly.

The House of Hansel and Gretel's Witch Speaks

Aren't my ears pointy?

Candy killed me, but now
I'm turning into even stinkier candy;

air leeches to my arms, then won't slough off—
lizardlike weather. I'm frozen in place

longing for a kiss:

purple lipstick doubles my lips in size,
but I catch each trace of salt,
as if in endless water.
They say you can have twice the smile...

So if someone said they'd like to be *my* house,
I'd bid them a cool
Good morning.

Before my limbs, like butter, melt away.
Before my head, like water, turns clear.

Angel

My back is itchy.

In one hand, I hold a white stone;
in the other, an umbrella.

It's raining outside the umbrella.

Slowly, I crane
my head over one shoulder
to look behind my back:

it's raining there, too.

My shadow's wet;
for a moment,
I'm almost sad.

It wants to speak,
like a creature of flesh and blood
with sense perceptions.

A white mouse pops
from my hand;

if it flies
I think I'll take off, too.

GOOD MORNING

Today the sun came out.
And so, today
I get to be a brighter person.

I press my baseball cap down hard
and do a 180°
with my face.

I bury my eyes deep in my hat,
lips grinning like a doll
whose smile survives a gunshot,

and if I eat a real breakfast,
I'll be able to keep talking
like I have a second throat.

Maybe I'll play piano
as if I have a wizard's hands.

I'll slide on white gloves,
stretch out all ten fingers.

I'm turning into a lover of the truth.

A Tale of Eyes

1. BEING ONE PERSON AT A TIME IS GOOD ENOUGH

Each day, I open different eyes.

Morning never fails to break;

and the days my eyes open when I want
brim full of grace.

But even when I have to prise open eyes
that crave to stay shut, I want
a kiss.

2. NOT BEING ABLE TO BE ONE PERSON AT A TIME IS KIND OF SAD

I shall put on my t-shirt with the eyeball silkscreen print,
and from tomorrow, turn into a giant dragonfly.

Today is my
very last day.

My eyes' last glance
turns out the window—

my eyes upon eyes, and
ever more eyes in my eyes.

Like a dragonfly with its wings torn off,
morning comes in for a crash landing.

3. I'VE GOT A FAVOR

It does not do merely to open one eye in advance
and act like a little bit of a person.

Mom's sad enough to cry,
but as for me,
I – *cannot* – wipe away – clear liquids.

We cannot even cry together.