

I See the Dogs Inside You: Reclaiming Monstrosity for a Visionary Poetics

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Abstract

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Monsters have been made and used and reanimated in art since antiquity. Monstrosity, in this paper considered first through Ovid, has always been most inflicted upon marginalized people, notably women. Through the poetry of Kim Hyesoon and Mia Ayumi Malhotra, as well as the art of Kiki Smith, I examine in this paper the reclamation, subversion, and repurposing of monstrosity and the monstrous tradition (including the formless, the grotesque, the abject, and the sublime) by women to create a visionary poetics and practice that is truer in expressing the complicated realities marginalized people live; grants power and agency to these people; is truer at expressing a selfhood for people unwelcome or once unwelcome in traditional and dominant subjectivity/people who have been marked *other*; makes space for these people to imagine a freer future where the self is safer from consumption in its incomprehensible monstrosity; and extends a radical empathy to all animals, people, monsters, and things—an empathy that can be practiced in our lives to make that freer future real.

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I. POOR MONSTERS

I grew up a small monster. Very well-behaved, but a monster, nonetheless.

Not to argue that these are all spot-on examples of monsters, but as a child I was endlessly interested in dinosaurs; the villains of Scooby Doo and Power Rangers; the frightening baby-sun at the beginning of the Teletubbies; and the stuffed animals poorly sewn, missing an eye, or misshapen. In third grade, I was given my first book about Greek mythology. I was hooked on the monsters, more compelling than the heroes Jason and Hercules by far. The harpies, for instance, as described by Virgil in the Aeneid: “Bird-bodied, girl-faced things they (Harpies) are; abominable their droppings, their hands are talons, their faces haggard with hunger insatiable” (71). How could I not linger on that? Bird bodies, I can see, girl-faces, I can try to put together—but it gets harder and harder, more and more elusive. Abominable droppings, insatiable faces...I still can't quite create that image in my head. Not truly.

To be mixed provokes some mythos of monstrosity, some grotesque hybridity around you. What are you? How did your parents even meet, how did that happen? Do you feel more Mexican? More Pakistani? Do you believe in God? What religion do you practice? What food do you eat? What languages can you speak? What does your home look like? What do you *do* there? My life to them previously unimagined, maybe still partially unimaginable.

Incomprehensible. Monstrous. *How did you possibly come to be?*

Monstrosity, naturally, resists exact definition. Monstrosity is often defined *against* something else—a norm—and does not have one face. Various other concepts like the grotesque, the formless, the sublime, and the uncanny are useful in our understanding of the effects of monstrosity, for example, but is that monstrosity itself? What is the unifying factor? Classicist Dunstan Lowe suggests it is “Absolute formlessness...as the end toward which all deformations

gesture” (36). As monstrosity is something that is not the ideal, or the “*shapely*,” more and more words denoting deformity became synonymous with the original “*monstrum*”:

“The word *monstrum*, ‘monster’ or ‘prodigy,’ has a subtly different range from its English descendent. It originally denoted any manifestation of divine will (not necessarily a living body) that breached the natural order, provoking awe or at least shock. As academic treatments of monsters routinely observed, *monstrum* is etymologically linked with *monere*, to warn, and *monstrare*, to show. As its range of meanings grew in several directions outside the religious context, it became the nearest thing to a regular Latin term for physically anomalous beings. Yet it never shed its ritual origins completely, keeping an overtone of transgression and often threat. (Lowe 8)

As for monstrosity in this paper, I will consider the concept largely through the concerns of hybridity, animals, the grotesque, the formless, and the sublime, the first two concerns being the basis of many classical mythical monsters—the Harpies, mentioned before, as well as the Minotaur, Cerberus, the Chimera, and on.

Monsters are a sort of extreme *other*. They are not us, one might say. They are something more-than-human, or less-than-human. This has the potential to be dangerous—not the monster, not the other, but rather the way we use monstrosity in our world. This is important to acknowledge. Lowe notes, “[i]mperial evidence shows somatic abnormalities being both vilified and celebrated...Ethnographic and zoological texts describe monstrous races and creatures in faraway Africa or India” (3). Monstrosity has a long historical conversation with colonial and imperial writings and studies—always something posited *against* the “norm,” controlled and so designated by patriarchal and largely white gazes which prized their own understandings of rationality, their own image as the “I.” So the monstrous, then, is much more often applied to women and people of color—those outside of the “I.” The violence of monstrosity—not in that monsters, for example, attack marginalized people first (although...), but in the actual violence of making someone/something, or marking someone/something as monstrous—affects people of color and especially women most as far back as we can look.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, first published in 8 AD. While nearly any story from it is apt, I will consider one of Melville's translations, Book XIV:

Scylla and Glaucus (continued)

...

'See, I, the daughter of the shining Sun,
A goddess who possess the magic powers
Of spell and herb, I, Circe, pray that I
Be yours. Spurn her who spurns you; welcome one
Who wants you. By one act requite us both!'

But Glaucus answered: 'Sooner shall green leaves
Grow in the sea or seaweed on the hills
Than I change my love while Scylla lives.'
Rage filled the goddess' heart. She had no power
Nor wish to wound him (for she loved him well),
So turned her anger on the girl he chose.
In fury at his scorn, she ground together
Her ill-famed herbs, her herbs of ghastly juice,
And, as she ground them, sang her demon spells.
Then in a robe of deepest blue went forth
Out of her palace, through the fawning throng
Of beasts, to Rhegium that looks across
To Zancle's cliffs. Over the raging waves
She passed as if she stepped on solid ground,
And skimmed dry-shod the surface of the sea.

There was a little bay, bent like a bow,
A place of peace, where Scylla loved to laze,
Her refuge from the rage of sea and sky,
When in mid heaven the sun with strongest power
Shone from his zenith and the shade lay least.
Against her coming Circe had defiled
This quiet bay with her deforming drugs,
And after them had sprinkled essences
Of noxious roots; then with her witch's lips
Had muttered thrice nine times a baffling maze
Of magic incantations. Scylla came
And waded in waist-deep, when round her loins
She saw foul monstrous barking beasts. At first,
Not dreaming they were part of her, she fled
And thrust in fear the bullying brutes away.
But what she feared and fled, she fetched along,
And looking for her thighs, her legs, her feet,
Found gaping jaws instead like Hell's vile hound.
Poised on a pack of beasts! No legs! Below

Her midriff dogs, ringed in a raging row!
Glaucus, her lover, wept and fled the embrace
Of Circe who had used too cruelly
The power of her magic. Scylla stayed
There where she was and, when the first chance came
To vent her rage and hate on Circe, robbed
Ulysses of his comrades. Later, too,
She would have sunk the Trojan galleons,
Had she not been transformed before they came
Into a reef whose rocks rise up today,
And sailors shun her still and steer away. (326-7)

This is the tradition of monstrosity—violent, repulsive, inflicted upon a woman though she’s done no wrong, and in this case among others, at the heart of it, over a man. Scylla is brought up over and over in *Metamorphoses*, but this passage is particularly detailed, graphic, and monstrous. Bathing in waters poisoned by a jealous Circe, Scylla is transformed into a hybrid woman-dog, although her hybridity is not as clear cut as with other monsters in the book—her lower half becomes plural, difficult to imagine. How do we encounter this? Make sense of it? Lowe, considering David Williams, writes:

“the very activity of describing unfamiliar forms—of imagining and expressing the formless—is a transcendent experience. Monsters play an important epistemological role, challenging the normal mechanics of language and symbolic meaning. Like other ‘aesthetic deformations,’ they ‘propose a fundamental critique of rational discourse’ by showing that the relationship between sign and signified is arbitrary, and language is a limited vehicle for experience. For Williams, the representation of monstrous forms is a mode of expression that transcends rather than undermines logic: in late mediaeval Europe, the cognitive shock provide by animal-vegetable hybrids and fish-tailed women was considered a window onto divinity. The usual mental habit of interpretation drops away, worldly self and identity are lost, and the resulting experience is overwhelming...monsters are impossible to comprehend fully, yet at the same time they prompt partial recognitions” (33).

Perhaps we can’t quite make sense of it. Perhaps that’s the function of a monster: to be ultimately incomprehensible to us. Monstrosity is an *experience*, an analog, so then not easily digitized in language. It brings us to a place beyond language, so we understand them only in

pieces: “wherever the unfamiliar appears, especially in embodied forms, it must be familiarized by analogical thinking” (Lowe 35). This is often our default mode—“the natural habit of the interpreting mind,” Lowe says, is to “[map] the unfamiliar onto the familiar to render it recognizable” (45). Consider again the harpies—encountering them in an imagined real life or in text. Bird-bodies, we can recognize, we can compare to whole and real birds we know. Girl-faces—we know what that should look like, even if comprehending the way the bird-bodies and girl-faces connect is difficult. Abominable droppings, insatiable faces—suddenly we aren’t so sure, and we were hardly sure before: “language masks as much as it communicates: the more details a text provides, the more potential meanings confront the reader. By grappling to utter something [monstrosity] that words cannot capture, this text has ‘rendered itself less determinate in the act of trying to become more so’” (Lowe 34-35). This is the grotesque, the accumulation of all these details, the mixings of human and animal and more, it challenges us. Scylla is now partially a “raging row” of hounds, “gaping jaws” everywhere, starting at her crotch—trying to imagine that, for me, includes a sort of constant shapeshifting, so that I don’t ever fully recognize the image before me. I can’t get it right—it is unfathomable, it is beyond my language. And as I try to imagine it, I realize the absolute violence of the image, and the violence I am taking a part in by working in my mind to construct it.

Other translations offer an even more graphic account: “she stands in a frenzy of dogs, and restrains the subjoined backs / of wild beats in her truncated loins and protruding womb” (Lowe 83). Scylla’s elsewhere described beautiful upper half is placed in stark contrast to this new lower half: monstrous, repulsive, bestial, sexual, dangerous. A *frenzy*: uncontrollable; *subjoined*: added, attached; her loins *truncated*: cut short, mutilated; and finally, her womb *protruding*: thrust out, sticking out, obtrusive. This is the tradition of monstrosity—a woman

most often the one subjected to its violence. Note that her *lower half*, and so her reproductive half, is transformed. In fact, with woman hybrids, that is in general the transformed half—she no longer is a woman in the way it is classically understood. Any life she could possibly create is immediately dangerous, completely foreign. Scylla’s own body becomes foreign to her. At first, she doesn’t even realize it *is* her body. The dogs are *from* her body, in a sense, just transformed, and yet, they are not her at all. She attempts to flee from them, until it becomes clear she can’t. This is a fight with her own body. Eventually, she must simply be the monster. The dogs *are* her, and she comes to “restrain” and tame them, becoming the monster in the myths of others. We may empathize, with her, (until then), and yet she still horrifies us. She is something we *cannot* understand.

Monsters, like Scylla, in their unfamiliarity challenge normal mechanics of language and symbolic meaning. While this has often been at the expense of women and other marginalized bodies, it is, more than ever, not always the case. Monstrosity creates possibility in its resistance to regular modes of logic and interpretation—so it can become a way to resist and subvert our regular understandings, subjectivities, and gazes. The emphasis on the idea of creation regarding monsters makes them the ideal metaphor for artmaking and new selves. Women poets and artists are reclaiming and repurposing monstrosity to create a visionary poetics in which their realities are more truthfully articulated, traditional selfhoods are challenged, and new selfhoods can be created by oneself which are less consumable, more safe, and above all, more true. In this paper, I will look at the work of Korean Feminist poet Kim Hyesoon, the work of Japanese-American poet Mia Ayumi Malhotra, and finally, the art of Kiki Smith to examine the ways they utilize monstrosity against its tradition and towards a freer future.

II. TRUER REALITY

The first poem I'll consider is from Kim Hyesoon's *Mommy Must be a Fountain of Feathers*, translated from Korean by poet Don Mee Choi:

A Sublime Kitchen

They came to eat the moon again
The women ate the moon and their bellies grew each month
They squeezed breast-milk into the moon,
added the refreshing scent of mint to the roasted moon

I caught a glimpse of her kitchen once
The secretive chirp of the cooks dressed in white
The swirling storm severing the necks of wild ducks
on hundreds of wooden chopping boards
It was a sublime kitchen

A guest with child entered
Mommy, mommy, can I have a glass of tangy star!
She brought out a drink made of powdered rain cloud
and floated an icy star in it

I caught a glimpse of her kitchen once
The rain cloud of flour mushroomed
and all kinds of dead animals' blood flowed down the drain
the cries of countless spoons, chopsticks, fingers, toes
got sucked into the dishpan
It was a sublime kitchen

It's time to prepare a midnight meal
She cracked the moon over the frying pan
a hole as deep as a fingernail appeared on the moon
then a flock of birds crawled out from the hole
with their wings that can be fried
The flock of birds spread their black wings
across the sky as the night deepened
She roasted the wings all night

Slobbered, chewed, licked, burped, chewed and chewed, sucked, tasted, drank, got fed
nonstop, swallowed and shouted Cheers! Eat more! Hey, Over here! One more bottle!
Smacked lips, belched, gagged

Like the lips that never once closed
the buildings on both sides of the street at night
the sound of them being fed the night sky through their huge openings
Everything was sublime (22-23)

On the left side of the poem, we see the speaker getting glances into “her” kitchen—though unnamed, the context of the first stanza leaves us to guess the “her” is one of the women coming to eat the moon, and in the context of the book, the “her” is possibly Mommy. Of course, this is not the only place the poem stays. The poem is largely concerned with womanhood, domestic feminine spaces and expected behaviors, motherhood, violence and the grotesque, the monstrous, nation, and the sublime.

The poem begins “They came to eat the moon again”. This first line sets up the world of the poem beautifully—the image of the moon coupled with the word “again,” inspires a sense of ritual. The moon, of course, is a traditionally feminine sign tied to cyclicity, so the poem brings (both with the moon and the breast-milk and growing bellies of following lines) in the ideas of womanhood, madness, menstruation—so then also pregnancy, life and death, and children. Creation and consumption. One way to read the moon, very in line with other poems in this book, is *as a baby*.

The poem continues to unfold in violent excess with scenes from the kitchen: the cooks appear as a “swirling storm severing” necks, and there are “hundreds” of cutting boards. A monstrous kitchen. Cooking is a behavior and task assigned to the feminine domestic sphere. That tradition and expectation, however, is subverted in this poem by being made so violent and excessive. Rather than the quiet scene of the doting wife making dinner for her family, we get the sublime and increasingly monstrous kitchen. As noted in Don Mee Choi’s introduction to this book, in Hyesoon’s work, “the space of oppression” (in this case, the kitchen) is turned into “a place where a woman redefines herself, retranslates herself,” and here—as throughout the

book—the woman is taking and exerting a certain amount of *power*. A new space is created in the monstrous that allows for this—Scylla does the same.

This isn't uncomplicated, however—it is power that only can come out of the prescribed sphere, and it often manifests as power that is similarly violent to oppressors. In another poem, “Father is Heavy, What do I Do?” the speaker again considers consumption as in “A Sublime Kitchen”: “I, a woman poet, devour one hundred fathers / and become a father” (41). The Father then enacts violence throughout the poem (“Father chops off your arm... Father has to bring his hands together sharpened like blades”), until the poem concludes, “Child, I’ve become such a repulsive Father” (41). While none of this is *ideal*, it is *true*. The extremity of monstrosity and transformation allow for the expression of the lived reality and power. The fear of monsters often does have to do with consumption, although it doesn't have to explicitly. It plays analogously with the loss of self in the experience of seeing monstrosity—the threat it poses to our construction of ourselves and other. The speaker becomes monstrous—the violent father figure, with “big leather shoes,” and a “machine-heart”—through that act of consumption and becoming—eating, and so being eaten. “A Sublime Kitchen” does the same as it continues.

The poem and the meal become a space of grotesque monstrosity. Similar to pregnancy and birth, and within women or women's spaces (like the kitchen), there is a dangerous fertility. The grotesque mix of the meal in the fourth stanza reads: “and all kinds of dead animals' blood flowed down the drain / the cries of countless spoons, chopsticks, fingers, toes”. When we *really* attempt to imagine the image, the amalgamation of all these disparate parts—animal, kitchen-ware, and perhaps human—is elusive and absolutely monstrous. The mix exists, in my head, in a sort of formlessness because it grows increasingly difficult to imagine the parts—even less recognizable, a purer monstrosity. This space of horror, formlessness, and partially unimaginable

death (the pieces of the mix, their becoming pieces) is where poetry, motherhood, and life come from and fall into—in this space, again, womanhood may be more accurately expressed (emotionally, not literally), and then reshaped into something safer from oppression in its embracing of violence, becoming violent, and becoming monstrous or sublime—not wholly able to be understood, or interpreted, abused, and *used* by a gaze, including ours as reader. At the end of this stanza, Hyesoon repeats: “It was a sublime kitchen.” There is horror, but it is not an overall negative space—it is more than that. There is pleasure. It is transformative.

The next stanza, similarly, complicates an image much like the harpies and Scylla and other monsters, as the speaker watches “her” crack the moon like an egg to be cooked, which by the precision of the image I can see well—this goes for the hole that appears on the moon, as well. However, more happens: “then a flock of birds crawled out from the hole.” We have to reconcile many things, suddenly: the size of the moon, the size of the birds, how birds might crawl, the discomfort of the image...only for all of it to be complicated further, and brought back to a space of explicit consumption, use, and violence in the following line: “with their wings that can be fried.” The flock itself is not monstrous, and therefore not safe from our consumption—it is only the whole image that is, the accumulation of detail as language masks what it tries to describe.

To move toward the end of the poem—the only stanza that is outside of the poem’s established pattern of form is the penultimate one, which reads more like a prose poem. Over and over again, we get the actions of consumption in gross detail. There is pleasure, luxury, and power in this continuing, long repetition and in the words themselves (“Cheers!”), subverting a space and practice which exists in the feminine domestic sphere (not to mention all of the expectations around the way women should eat: politely, after everyone else has, and not too

much). That is, until the last word, “gagged,” which complicates the power dynamics again and expresses reality in a way only the monstrous accumulation could get to. Yes, there is power being taken, but power within certain confines, and it is not an impervious one—there is still suffering. This, again, is similar to the sublime itself, which I believe is enacted in this stanza through the growing excess in the list, the never-ending commas and the exuberant exclamation points—there is awe, but there is terror.

The last stanza of the poem moves the poem physically out from just the kitchen to the city and so, the nation, expressing that the oppression of women exists as a larger structure as well, better expressing the lives and reality of women in Korea (and I would argue, elsewhere). “Like the lips that never once closed” bridges the gap to allow the poem to move, with the lips reaching backward to refer to the mouth and the labia and forward to refer to the buildings. This continues the crossing and complicated threads of consumption, pleasure and power (sex), and birth and creation—Lowe notes, while discussing Pliny’s *real* Ethnography attempt:

In some animals, the fetus itself is shapeless; in humans, the womb produces even stranger things. Menstrual fluid is the material for human generation, but is also *monstrificus*, producing *monstra* or unexpected things...Pliny describes another misbegotten form that sometimes arises, the *mola*, an impenetrable and mobile blob of inert flesh...These beliefs that uterine substances are dangerously unpredictable arise directly from limitations in male understanding of female fertility. The *mola* is literally the “incarnation” of interpretive anxiety over the female body, especially its generative capacity. (56)

Women are made to be sites of dangerous fertility—what progeny might be spurned? I believe this principle of monstrosity in women is analogous to some of the concerns of “A Sublime Kitchen,” “Father is Heavy, What do I Do?” and *Mommy Must Be a Fountain of Feathers* as a whole. What cycles are perpetuated for women and men and children? How do children grow up to be women and men? And besides *life*, oral creation—poetry! What role can

art play? What dangerous art may be created? All of this, I believe, is signaled in the connection of the lips to the buildings—reaching backward, as examined, and reaching forward, to nation.

Women and nation are often tied throughout the book, and throughout many human histories across time. Women are used in different ways for the building of nations, whether physically (having children through force or their own choice), or through idealized concepts (Helen of Troy, modern posters asking people to fight in a war for the sake of women, etc.). Here, the buildings, which are symbolic of the women due to their previous comparison to lips, are eating the night! A consumption of darkness—that oppressive space, now being the thing that gives sustenance. Power taken under the circumstances, the oppression subverted by way of the impossible and monstrous depictions (lips never closing, “huge openings”). However, the poem is not left so uncomplicated—the buildings are passive, they are *being fed*. Do they have agency? Do they want to be fed the night? Have the lips never once closed out of their own choice, or because they are not, for whatever reason, able? Either way—“Everything was sublime.” The sublime, achieved through monstrosity, allows for a subversion of tradition and power while *still* acknowledging and complicated and true reality. There is pleasure, and there is pain. Terror and awe.

III. TRUER SELF

Kim Hyesoon’s newest work, *Autobiography of Death*, also translated by Don Mee Choi, only continues to deepen her monstrous and ghostly universe. It was written in response to the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster, in which students drowned, and there was never an investigation. The book contains forty-nine poems, each representing one day of the period in Buddhist belief where the spirit, after death, continues to roam without its body. On the fiftieth day, the spirit enters the reincarnation cycle. The book as a whole, like her others, is deeply concerned with

violence and what Hyesoon calls “the structure of death,” or the world we live in, the reality we face. This poem, in particular, attempts to locate, mourn, and free a self within that structure.

Such Painful Hallucination

Day Forty

Listen, listen carefully to what I have to say
Now you'll see the world inside your glasses

You'll know what the water is saying inside you
You'll know what the fire is saying inside you

You'll see the three eyes dangling from you
You'll see your rage as the other
You'll see the four eyes dangling from you
You'll see your anxiety as the other
You'll see the eight heads dangling from you
You'll see your fear as the other
You'll see the dogs inside you
You'll see the pigs inside you

You'll see the you who became a triangle
You'll see the you who became a rectangle

You'll pass a tribe of endless patterns made from your voices that never evaporate

Listen, listen without fear
for it's the night of you raging like the influenza
for it's the night of the mourning outfit giving birth to you at the bottom of the well
for it's the night of you blooming for the hundredth, a hundred and one times
for it's the night of death panting repeaterepeaterepeatedly from hunger
for it's the night of all the holes of your body packing up to move

for it's the night of you who have died inside you awakening
for it's the night of the snails, the wingless bats
waking up faceless, brainless, their bodies slippery at the bottom of the well

for it's the night of the dead you of yesterday and the dead you of the day before jumping rope
each time you jump up a dead giraffe, a dead dragon, a dead hen falls to the bottom

Look, look carefully without fear (64-5)

The speaker in this poem is trying to locate the *you*. The *you* is multiple—it is the speaker talking to the self (you’ll see the world inside your glasses), it is the speaker talking to the reader, it is the speaker talking to a collective (the multiples of body parts, is one place that supports this), the speaker talking to a dead person/dead collective (“you who have died inside you awakening”, talking about the reincarnation cycle), death itself, and also could be a particular intimate *you* that the speaker addresses. Not a single reading excludes another—I believe we are meant to understand the *you* as all of these at once: multiple, monstrous, and unified. This speaks to a truer articulation of *self*, as we do constitute ourselves from all of these understandings. The traditional notion of selfhood prizes a false, independent “I,” and has excluded, in the past, particular people from its domain of subjects—anyone, generally, who was not a white man. People who have never been included in this are not quite subjects, then—not human in the same way—may come to understand themselves differently. By monstrosity, perhaps: by the thing that is *different*, incomprehensible if we want the traditional “I,” a new “I” aware that it is defined not by its supposed independence but by its relationships to other things, people, histories, and “the world.”

The second stanza references fire and water, elements of earth and creation—spontaneous and monstrous creation is always possible, in myth, with these elements present. The self will be created, the poem asserts, and the danger of monstrosity is not feared, but embraced: “You’ll see the three eyes dangling from you.” You *will* see this. This line gains meaning with the one that follows it: “You’ll see your rage as the other.” The acknowledgment of the other lays clear our task—creating and finding the self. What is interesting is that the first line mentioned says “*the* three eyes,” while the second reads “*your* rage.” The monstrous, while a part of you, dangling

from you, is *not* you—as with Scylla. What is yours, is the rage—and *that* is what you are trying to rid your self of.

The monstrous image, while gross, is imaginable enough—but the third line of the stanza immediately revises and complicates your understanding: “You’ll see the four eyes dangling from you.” The stanza escalates in this fashion to seeing “eight heads dangling,” then “the dogs inside you,” then “the pigs.” The grotesque accumulation gestures toward formlessness—how can we picture that literally? But it is in that gesture that the truth of emotional experience and lived experience is revealed. A self does have that many parts, a self is partially incomprehensible, and so then a self may be impossible: “You’ll see the you who became a triangle,” or “a rectangle.” Additional selves are introduced, other *yous*, and the logic of all traditional understandings of self is obliterated. The stacking of selves and conflation of parts is grotesque; it trespasses boundaries. Kristeva’s “abject,” the “vortex of summons and repulsion” that are “opposed to *I*” (1) are caused by “what disturbs identity, society, and order...what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Both “A Sublime Kitchen” and “Such Painful Hallucination” do this—this something beyond our comprehension, something monstrous. It is *this* fact, the act of transgression and our inability to reconcile it, that gives the poems and their speakers their complicated power. It is from a place that both gives them agency and keeps them jettisoned from the traditional “I,” although they wouldn’t have access to “I” anyway—so why not embrace the grotesque? And when the accumulation and transgression becomes almost too much to bear, the speaker insists, “Listen, listen without fear.”

If we do indeed listen, as the speaker implores us as readers to (among all the other *yous* addressed), we enter the section illustrating “the night of you.” This phrase again suggests multiple facets of the self, as if there is a night of you, there will also be whatever is *not* the night

of you, at the very least. The image of “night” brings me obviously to darkness, and so to, again, the “blackened” (coming from the literally entirely blackened manuscripts Hyesoon has seen due to censorship) space that Don Mee Choi asserts Hyesoon’s poetry comes from, a space of oppression and oppressor. In this book specifically though, the “night” also clearly refers to individual, and so collective death. In the interview with Don Mee Choi included in *Autobiography of Death*, Hyesoon says of writing the forty-nine poems, “I wondered whether the spirits that are dead and yet alive have become one body or whether they’re all separated inside each death, whether death is really separate and individual. Then I also came to think that all deaths become one enormous you, or other, or maybe one very small you” (99).

It is because this poem is concerned with self that it is deeply invested in the mentioned structure of death, and so also reincarnation and birth. It is the death already in you that gives birth to you, you have died a hundred times, lines 18-19 assert. This is a construction of the self that is monstrous in that it is again, a sort of amalgamation of selves in one—those who have come before you are you—and those selves that have come before you could be *anything*, could have been explicitly monstrous, or animal, or inanimate; could have had heads dangling; could have been a triangle; could have been a snail; could wake up “faceless, brainless” in the monstrous mire of dangerous fertility that is, in this poem, the bottom of the well, gathering more death (giraffes, dragons, hens) through your life, through “each time you jump up.” There is power in this reclamation of the monstrous, in this facing of death and monstrosity without rage, without anxiety, and without fear. The night is death, the night is oppression—and yet, it is a “blooming,” you can see yourself in the lovely image of “jumping rope.” The irreconcilable and monstrous images and selves in this poem are truer to reality than normal, non-monstrous, or unchallenging language could be. This is truer to living as a marginalized person in a structure of

death. It is also truer to *self*, the way we understand ourselves in certain structures, and the way we can create a self within them that *does* have power, that can go on living. “Look, look carefully without fear.” Behold, and reclaim monstrosity to repurpose for your own power. Don’t be scared. Don’t just listen.

Look.

IV. VISIONARY MONSTERS

The final poem I’ll discuss comes from Mia Ayumi Malholtra’s *Isako Isako*, a collection in three parts, dealing largely with ancestry—particularly female lineage. Much of the book details the lives of Isako, a character which is the amalgamation of, primarily, the author’s two grandmothers (Isako’s name coming directly from the combination of theirs), but also, Malholtra’s entire female lineage as a whole, stretching backwards and forwards from her. This poem comes from the third part of the book, “In the Quiet After”:

One Day You’ll Look in the Mirror and See Lions

May you not fear what lies ahead.
 May the moon’s full face
 light your own, milky
with tears. May it ferry you into mystery.
 May your body, luminous
 in its skin, so thin the bones
 glow through, brim
 with whispered prayers,
lacrimal and lesser wings.

May the lion’s mouth be shut.
 May its head sink to the ground
 at your approach, splendid
 in your cotton nightie, an apparition
of joint and socket plainly revealed.
 May you stand and be spared.
 Please, all I ask.

Cast in greenish light, your hands rise,
tendrill-like, to receive
a fullness your daughter,
drawing near, feels spilling
onto her fingers. Poor soul, you can see
the fear lifting like smoke

off her skin. *Don't fight*, you want to say.
Come, stroke the beast's shaggy head.
Pull open its terrible maw, see
for yourself, not the teeth
you expect, but the gentle rumination
of bovid incisors, muted tongue.
Come, child. Lie with the lion.
The ox, the lamb. (92-3)

In this poem, both speaker and addressee are multiple. As mentioned, *Isako Isako* is concerned with female lineage—the speaker, therefore, can be any woman within that line speaking to any other that comes after. More specifically, it can be Isako speaking to her daughter, or to her granddaughter, the author. The primary reading I find, however, especially being that this poem is nearly the end of the book, is that the speaker is the author herself addressing her daughters—her forthcoming work, she says, is mostly coming from this angle. The poem's future tense also suggests this to me—it is working to create a visionary place where, by embracing monstrosity, the self is safer and more powerful.

It begins with a similar assertion explored in the last Hyesoon poem: “May you not fear what lies ahead.” What lies ahead is certain. The speaker expresses hope and possibility that it may be faced without fear—not only that, but this is a sort of prayer that you *do* face it without fear. Death, oppressor, monster—face it. Like “A Sublime Kitchen,” the feminine symbol of the moon gives power even in the circumstances: “May [the moon] ferry you into mystery.” Ferry brings to mind the ferryman Charon, a male figure here replaced. The mystery, then, is possibly death, the unknowable thing. And yet, mystery is so much more complicated a word than death

would have been—mystery can be of the monstrous, the thing we cannot understand—this is supported by the image of the “luminous” body in the next line, and its “[brimming]” with “wings.” The luminous body is more-than-human, the impossibility of brimming feels monstrous (especially in the possibility of dangerous creation), and the wings introduces the grotesque—some mix of animal within us, which brings us perfectly to the next line: “May the lion’s mouth be shut.” The lion is a masculine symbol of strength and power. It is an apex predator, and in terms of animals, quite beastly—it is one of monstrous elements of this poem, made more monstrous (“terrible”) and then less (“bovid”) as the poem goes on, but even by its title, the poem indicates hybridity before one even begins. You *will* see this monster in you, this power. But it can be embraced. It can be tamed. The following lines imagine the lion immediately submitting to the power already in the *you*, the apparition, whether alive or dead or not-yet born, the power of this amalgamated and multitudinous ancestral self that is monstrous in its own right, luminous, brimming with wings.

“May you stand and be spared.” The beauty of this line is in its address to both lion and human, and so the address to the both of them as one, as well. May your head rise, lion, and may you be spared by the human. May the lion spare the human. May we all let the lion-human stand and be spared. May the monsters live, may we and they show mercy. It brings together all of the pieces of being and asks every piece, and every reader, for a radical empathy in every direction. A single understanding cannot be pinned down. A monster is partially unknowable, and yet, may we love it. May it protect you. May it bring you power. May it help you stand.

This is a visionary subversion of Scylla, who fights her monstrosity, who is made by her male myth-makers to turn into a murderous, rageful antagonist. Here, all parts could be offered mercy and empathy, there could be *no* fight: “*Don’t fight*, you want to say. / Come, stroke the

beast's shaggy head. / Pull open its terrible maw..." The monstrosity is acknowledged, and yet, words as gentle as *stroke* and *shaggy* are presented. There is no violence that need be inflicted—even though the maw seems less gentle, the line is undercut immediately, as are our possible expectations or familiarity with the image of the lion as the speaker says, we will see "not the teeth / you expect, but the gentle rumination / of bovid incisors, muted tongue." The teeth become like the cow's—and cows have no upper incisors, only a pad with which to grasp grass. They do have lower incisors, but bovids are herbivores. Their rumination—chewing of cud, as well as *thought*, which is not a physical action and therefore of little threat—is *gentle*, their tongue *muted*. The monster can be made/*is* familiar, after all, and can be a creature we live in harmony with, a creature we see and embrace outside and inside ourselves: "Lie with the lion. / The ox, the lamb."

These final lines can be read a few ways. There is "[l]ie with the lion," as in, reproduce with and create hybrids with the lion—a very thorough embrace of monstrosity, taking a sexual agency unseen in most myth. There is also the simpler interpretation of one being peacefully in the company of the monster. The ox and the lamb can be additional creatures, multiple monsters including the addressee that all exist in one space together—the ox can also *be* the lion, and the lamb can *be* the addressee. That last sentence brings them together in the unit of the sentence, omitting possible further descriptions, prepositions, verbs, etc. that might impose a hierarchal relationship between the two, or too clearly delineate that they either come completely together or remain completely separate. The ambiguity is what gives the final image(s) power, the possibility of all of these things at once, the impossibility of a single meaning or understanding of self that could be consumed and subjugated, and the beauty of the hybrid and the monstrous in creating a future that is freer, safer, and more true.

V. VISUAL VISIONARY MONSTERS & CONCLUSION

The last works I'd like to consider are a couple of the sculptures of artist Kiki Smith.



Rapture, 2001

Like another work of Smith's, *Lilith* (1994), *Rapture* is a piece that looks right at you. This sculpture, made of bronze, depicts the birth or resurrection story of an anonymous woman. It strangely calls to mind many other, much more classically beautiful birth stories and works of art—*The Birth of Venus* being one, her own romanticized (and originally monstrous) birth. This sculpture elicits an entirely different response.

Linguistics and literature professor Maria Antónia Sousa Monteiro da Cunha Lima compares Smith to Frankenstein, writing, “Smith is the example of the sculptor as monster maker, because she has the capacity of taking damaged bodies and making them whole...producing artistic acts of reanimation” with “her focus on anonymous feminine forms rather than particular personalities,” leading to the examination of “female archetypes” (280). This is a reanimation in that the woman is transformed, born out of a wolf. Either she *is* the wolf or is only *of* it, but either way, she is monstrous. Her body is so smooth it is uncanny, especially in comparison with the wolf. She also keeps one foot in the belly and one hand on a leg—the beast is not fully shed, not fully abandoned. They are eternally connected in this moment, the ambiguity around them impossible to penetrate and feel sure about—we cannot fully understand.

And still, the figure exerts power. She moves forward, she looks ahead, and she is the one left standing. This birth has given her shape, has given her power, and now she wields it to challenge us with her full-scale body. It is working *against* traditions that create art like *The Birth of Venus*. Monteiro da Cunha Lima notes, “Smith concentrates on depictions of the female form, challenging the tradition of male artists exploitation of the female body as an erotic subject. Her visceral sculptural work, constituted by bodies in states of abjection, is determined by a tension between their delicate and beautiful materiality and the shockingly primal acts they depict” (281). Much like new poets work against the traditions of mythical violence in works like

the *Metamorphoses*, Smith's sculptures reclaim monstrosity to challenge us and create new stories of power.



Untitled, 1992

The last sculpture I'll look at is this bronze one, *Untitled*, of another anonymous woman. Her face is not confrontational, is less visible. Her posture is submissive, her arms extend so long and taffy-like it is uncanny, but her hands are open out to you, as if in prayer, or service. This sculpture is monstrous in its transgression of real human form, but it reminds me of the possibility for grace in "One Day You'll Look in the Mirror and See Lions." The sculpture poses

zero threat, indeed offers herself to you, instead. You may pet her head, like the lion's. You may lie with her. In her gentle composition, she inspires a radical empathy for the monstrous. A monster need not be inherently violent—she asks for an exchange between herself and the viewer, some relationship to be formed, despite the fact that we cannot fully understand her or her circumstances, and never will. We should trust in her anyway, see ourselves in her, and extend our arms and open our hands the same way.

This is the way the monstrous has helped inform my art-making and my life. Day to day, we should extend our arms. We should open our hands. We should lie with the lion. We should reclaim and subvert the monstrosity laid upon us. I should embrace my many distorted faces. I should embrace the ghostly version of myself that paces the hallway. I should continue to practice extreme empathy for myself, for animals, for other people, for things. My art should not be afraid of this, my art should look without fear. It should be dangerously fertile, I should create without fear. It should invite you to hold my open hand. It should invite you to roll yourself down my long and offered arms. My art should create a space in which I can express a truer, more complicated selfhood, it should create a space in which I can imagine myself in the future free, it should be merciful. It should attempt, knowing the failure, understanding. It should accept that failure. It should do all of this, allowing also for the acknowledgement of violence. Allowing for violence.. But ultimately: moving beyond, as Kim Hyesoon, Mia Ayumi Malhotra, and Kiki Smith do.

The visionary monster can exert its power with violence, but it can also show power in the incomprehensible as the vehicle for a new unity, a new safety. The art we make reclaiming the monstrous can imagine and practice a future that accounts for the reality of marginalized

people and the impossibility of traditional selfhood *all while* freeing us to express, embrace, and move beyond all of that, truly.

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