

"[Kim's] writing is ... often spectacular, reminding us of the sparse but beautiful prose of HARUKI MURAKAMI." —TIME OUT CHICAGO



# YOUR REPUBLIC IS CALLING YOU

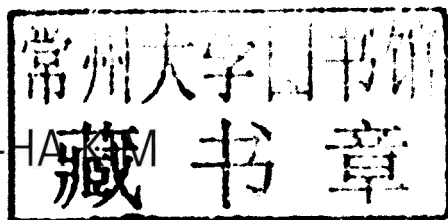
**YOUNG-HA KIM**



**A NOVEL**

YOUR  
REPUBLIC  
IS CALLING  
YOU

YOUNG-HA



Translated from the Korean by Chi-Young Kim



A Mariner Original > Mariner Books > Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Boston New York 2010

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Publishing Co., Ltd., Korea 2006

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selections from this book, write to Permissions,  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company,  
215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

[www.hmhbooks.com](http://www.hmhbooks.com)

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Kim, Young-ha, date.

[Pitui cheguk. English]

Your republic is calling you / Young-ha Kim ; translated  
from the Korean by Chi-Young Kim.

p. cm.

"A Mariner Original"

ISBN 978-0-15-101545-0

1. Kim, Young-ha, date—Translations into English. I. Kim,  
Chi-Young. II. Title.

PL992.415.Y5863P5813 2010

895.7'34—dc22

2010002432

*Book design by Melissa Lotfy*

Printed in the United States of America

DOC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

*The translation of this book was funded in part by the  
Daesan Foundation.*

PRAISE FOR  
**YOUNG-HA KIM's**  
*I HAVE THE RIGHT TO DESTROY MYSELF*

"Think of it as Korean noir."

—LOS ANGELES TIMES

"Stylish . . . This book is anything but predictable."

—NEWARK STAR LEDGER

"Mesmerizing."

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"A stylish, inventive writer . . . Noir with a piquant exotic twist."

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"Kim's tantalizing debut novel . . . is a self-conscious literary exploration of truth, death, desire and identity."

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"Mr. Kim's writing is tense, elemental, tangy. Like Georges Simenon, his keen engagement with human perversity yields an abundance of thrills as well as chills (and for good measure, a couple of memorable laughs). This is a real find."

—Han Ong, author of *FIXER CHAO*

YOUR REPUBLIC IS  
CALLING YOU

BOOKS BY YOUNG-HA KIM

I Have the Right to Destroy Myself  
Your Republic Is Calling You

**To Eunsoo**

YOUR REPUBLIC IS  
CALLING YOU



7:00 A.M.

## SPEAK UP

**H**E OPENS HIS EYES. He feels heavy and his breath stinks. Slowly, his brain whirs into activity, and a word gradually reveals itself, like a stranger emerging from fog. Headache. He has never in his entire life suffered from a headache, but he would have to agree if someone pronounced that what he feels is indeed a headache. He thinks it odd that such an insidious, unfamiliar throbbing could be expressed in one bland word—"headache." This intricate amalgam of physical pain and psychic irritation started last night; it triggered an ominous feeling about everything that would soon unfold in the world beyond his bed. He feels a passing disgust at his own body. It's as if his soul, having lain dormant in his body, woke up, discovered the heavy and authoritative being trapping it, and began pounding on it loudly in protest.

Lying still, he thinks about his headache, his agony growing worse. A small needle is stabbing the back of his head. He doesn't know how to deal with it. He resolves to think of this mysterious pain as a temporary visitor, which makes

it easier to tolerate. He stretches out to caress his wife's hip. She moves away, mumbling nasally. He pushes his hand deep into her panties and strokes the hair sprouting all the way up to her belly button, but she doesn't react. He slides his hand out of her underwear and rubs his eyes.

She asks, still half asleep, "Aren't you going to work?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you going to work?"

"What about you?"

"Feed the cat." She buries her face into her pillow.

Ki-yong pushes the covers off and gets out of bed slowly. The cat comes over and rubs her head on his feet as she does each morning, demanding food. He measures out some cat food with a stainless steel scoop and pours it into her bowl. The cat, whose mottled brown, black, and white fur creates a map of the world on her body, contentedly chomps on her kibble. He gently strokes her neck, then goes into the bathroom, takes out his night guard, and places it in a cup.

Last winter, his dentist warned: "If you don't do something about that teeth grinding, you're going to need dentures soon."

Ki-yong unscrews the cap of the mouthwash bottle and pours the blue liquid into the cup holding his custom-made mouthpiece. He squeezes toothpaste onto his toothbrush, his thoughts wandering to the small needle poking his brain. The more he tries to forget about the needle, the more insistent it becomes. Now it attacks one spot persistently, like a wire jabbing at a clogged pipe. He taps the back of his head with his hand but it doesn't help.

"Dad."

He looks into the mirror at his daughter with the toothbrush still in his mouth.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asks.

“Iffwoffing.” He wants to say “It’s nothing,” but his toothbrush is in the way. Hyon-mi pokes him in the back, her lips dancing as she tries to hide her smile. Wearing pink Mickey Mouse pajamas, the fifteen-year-old drags herself to the dining table. She pours Kellogg’s cereal into a bowl, opens the fridge, and takes out the milk carton. The cereal crackles as the milk fills the bowl. She crunches on her breakfast. The cat wanders by, rubbing against Hyon-mi’s foot. It feels like a slinking snake to Hyon-mi.

“Meooowwwr,” the cat protests, as if she knows what the girl is thinking.

After rinsing, Ki-yong comes out of the bathroom and picks up the cat. Only at that point does his wife, Ma-ri, step out of the bedroom, in her underwear. She isn’t wearing a bra and the blue veins threading past her nipples make her look cold. She scratches her stomach with her left hand, encased in a cast, while covering a yawn with the other. Approaching the table, she tousles Hyon-mi’s hair with her injured hand.

“Did you sleep well?” Ma-ri asks her daughter.

Hyon-mi shakes her head. Hyon-mi hates that her mother walks around the house half naked, so she won’t even glance at Ma-ri when she isn’t wearing anything. Ki-yong presses his fingers against his temple and offers, “My head hurts.”

“You never get headaches,” Ma-ri says.

“Well, I guess I do now.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Ma-ri throws back, heading into the bathroom.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry, I meant to say something else. Is it a migraine? Is it only on one side?”

“It feels like a needle is sticking into my brain. When does your cast come off?”

His question is buried under the flow of water. "What?" she asks, frowning.

"The cast on your arm."

"Oh, they told me to come by next week. It's so itchy, it feels like ants are crawling around in there."

"Maybe they are."

Ma-ri closes the bathroom door. She broke her wrist two weeks ago, when a department store escalator lurched to a stop and she fell, unable to stay on her feet against the crush of people behind her.

"You should listen to Yuki Kuramoto," Hyon-mi instructs Ki-yong as she places her bowl in the sink.

"Yuki who?"

"He's a Japanese pianist. He's supposed to be good for headaches."

"You're kidding."

"Dad, you're not one of those people who think kids only say stupid things, are you?" asks Hyon-mi, shooting him a look.

"No."

"So give it a try, okay?"

Hyon-mi is already holding out a Yuki Kuramoto CD. He takes it and slides it in his briefcase. For a split second, Ki-yong feels as if he were floating. It's a joyous feeling, a sensation of his heels lifting slightly off the ground. The mere act of holding the CD is alleviating his pain. Or is it the solace of his daughter's worried expression?

Feeling buoyant, he tells Hyon-mi, "I think it's working already."

"See, told you." Hyon-mi heads into her room to change.

Ki-yong hears Ma-ri flush. He goes into the master bathroom, washes his face, and starts to shave. The water is warm and the suds are soft on his face. He wipes his face

with a towel and reviews his schedule for the day. He doesn't think he will be that busy. He has to settle the accounts with a theater in the afternoon, but since it's only a formality, a phone call will do.

He picks out a brand-new shirt and a bluish gray silk tie. He puts on a navy jacket, and he's ready for work. Briefcase in hand, he knocks on the bathroom door.

"Are you going to be late tonight?" he asks Ma-ri.

"What?" Ma-ri opens the door and pokes her head out. "What did you say?"

"Are you going to be late tonight?"

Ma-ri thinks for a second and shakes her head. "I'm not sure. What about you?"

"I don't have any plans, but I'm not sure either."

Hyon-mi comes out of her room, fastening the blouse buttons of her school uniform. She pushes her feet into her Pumas and yanks open the front door. Ki-yong follows her.

"Then everyone's on their own for dinner," Ma-ri says.

"Okay, see you later," Ki-yong tells Ma-ri.

"Yeah, okay," Ma-ri says, following them to the front door. "Hyon-mi, you're coming home straight from school, right?"

"What for? Nobody's going to be here anyway."

"Where are you going to be, then?"

"I don't know." Hyon-mi slams the door behind her.

Ma-ri reopens it a crack and admonishes her daughter, her face solemn. "You have to understand that we're busy with work. You don't even go to cram schools. Where do you think you're going to go?"

"I'm not going anywhere!" Hyon-mi shoots back.

This time, Ma-ri closes the door without a word. Ki-yong and Hyon-mi stand in silence in front of the elevator. The doors open and they get on.

"Dad."

“Yeah?”

“You guys are really weird sometimes. It’s like you’re expecting me to get in trouble. You really don’t trust me?”

“No, it’s just that scary things happen.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about me,” Hyon-mi says, and pouts. The elevator arrives at the first floor. They exit, one after the other. “See you later, Dad,” Hyon-mi calls out as Ki-yong heads toward the underground garage.

“See you later.”

Walking down to the garage, Ki-yong’s head starts to pound again. The needles, having multiplied, swim slowly in his brain.

HYON-MI WALKS DOWN the winding path through the apartment complex and stops in front of Building 104. She takes out her cell phone to check the time. 7:42 A.M. She frowns a little, but then feels a hand on her shoulder. As she turns her head, a finger pokes her cheek.

“What the hell?”

It’s A-yong. “I get you every time!” she crows.

“You’re dead!” Hyon-mi says, aiming a gentle kick to A-yong’s calf.

Like a cartoon character, A-yong raises both arms and cries, “Oww!” The two girls, who are the same height and have identical hairstyles, start toward school.

A-yong asks, “Did you do the homework?”

“Which class?”

“Viper’s?”

“Math? Oops, no.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I can do it when I get to school.” Giggling, they walk out of the apartment complex and down a street lined with cherry trees.

At a crosswalk in front of a convenience store, Hyon-mi asks, "A-yong, can you keep a secret?"

"What?"

"It really is a secret. You can't tell anyone."

"Okay, okay. What is it?"

Hyon-mi assumes a grave expression. "My mom is really my stepmother."

"What?"

"Really, she's my stepmother."

"That's crazy."

"It's true!"

"Sure," A-yong says, smirking.

"I don't care that she is. It's actually better this way," Hyon-mi says.

"How did you find out?"

The light turns green and they cross the street.

"I found out a while ago."

"But your maternal grandmother likes you the best."

"She does it to hide that Mom's not my real mom. It's all just an act." Hyon-mi stops and looks into A-yong's eyes.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"No, I believe you."

"I don't think you do."

"Hey, I said I do."

The two girls amble across another crosswalk. Students from their school walk along the street, headed to class. A-yong slips her arm through Hyon-mi's.

Hyon-mi asks, "A-yong, what's the meaning of life?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Do you think it makes sense for people to live meaningless lives and then die?"

"I guess not."

"Right? I'm going to be a nun," Hyon-mi says.

"You think you're Mother Teresa?" A-yong teases.

"How'd you know I read her biography yesterday? You're psychic, A-yong!"

"She's the only nun I know. She was on our test, remember? You read way too much. Last week you said you wanted to be Madame Curie!"

"Who says nuns can't do physics? Sister Lee Hae-in writes poetry," Hyon-mi retorts.

"That doesn't make any sense. You think physics is the same thing as poetry?"

"Well, anyway I'm going to try to figure out the meaning of life," Hyon-mi concludes.

"Good luck."

"Just stop laughing at me," Hyon-mi says.

"Fine."

Hyon-mi sighs. "I think having a family is so pointless. Women are always trapped by their families, don't you think?"

A-yong slides her arm away from Hyon-mi's and changes the subject. "So have you given up completely on playing Go?"

"I can't compete with the guys. They're machines. When I'm next to them I feel like they're emotionless robots or something."

"But you can make a ton of money if you do well."

"Not a lot of people can do that well. Hey, you're all about the money, aren't you?"

"Nah, I don't care about money. Still. I wish I were you. I could play Go and drop out of school. Why aren't I good at anything?"

They see more students as they near the school gates. Girls, chattering like birds, trot quickly through the gates toward the classrooms. The boys look like oddly drawn figures,



their adolescent bodies disproportionate, off kilter. A few boys shoot A-yong a funny glance.

“Are they still making a big deal out of that?” Hyon-mi glares at them.

A-yong noticeably withdraws into herself as they enter the gates. She mumbles under her breath, “Whatever. I don’t care. They’ll do it until they croak.”

Hyon-mi walks in front of A-yong, as if to protect her. “Jesus, those assholes. Don’t they have anything better to do?” she spits out loudly.

A-yong averts her eyes from the hostile looks. Last fall, when A-yong was video chatting with her boyfriend, she flashed him. Her boyfriend captured the image and instant messaged it around. The incident wasn’t forgotten. Everyone in school, from the principal to the security guard, knows A-yong as “The Chest.” She’s the girl who flashed a boy, and that is all she will ever be to them. Other mean-spirited rumors bubbled up as well. If A-yong weren’t best friends with cool Hyon-mi, it would be difficult for her to deal with the fallout. But everyone is in awe of Hyon-mi, a girl famous for having played Go and then being a stellar student after she quit competing. Hyon-mi’s tough streak commands attention, although she is more popular among the girls than the boys.

Like the other kids, Hyon-mi first assumed A-yong would transfer. She even wrote her a farewell card. But A-yong’s parents didn’t choose that route. They had a unique worldview. They believed that human beings would soon achieve eternal life thanks to the development of bioengineering and cloning techniques, following a scheme developed by extraterrestrials who’d come to Earth a long time ago. Because A-yong’s parents believed such things, they didn’t understand their daughter’s humiliation at the hands of her peers. They