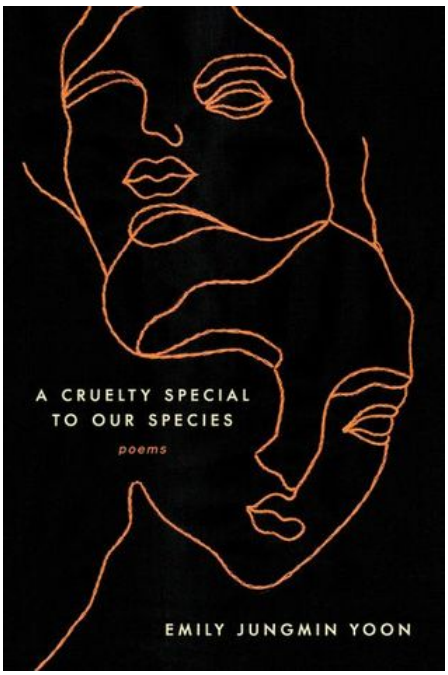

A Cruelty Special to Our Species: Poems

Emily Jungmin Yoon

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A Cruelty Special to Our Species: Poems Emily Jungmin Yoon
A piercing debut collection of poems exploring gender, race, and violence from a sensational new talent

In her arresting collection, urgently relevant for our times, poet Emily Jungmin Yoon confronts the histories of sexual violence against women, focusing in particular on Korean so-called “comfort women,” women who were forced into sexual labor in Japanese-occupied territories during World War II.

In wrenching language, *A Cruelty Special to Our Species* unforgettably describes the brutalities of war and the fear and sorrow of those whose lives and bodies were swept up by a colonizing power, bringing powerful voice to an oppressed group of people whose histories have often been erased and overlooked. “What is a body in a stolen country,” Yoon asks. “What is right in war.”

Moving readers through time, space, and different cultures, and bringing vivid life to the testimonies and confessions of the victims,Yoon takes possession of a painful and shameful history even while unearthing moments of rare beauty in acts of resistance and resilience, and in the instinct to survive and bear witness.

A Cruelty Special to Our Species: Poems Details

Date	:	Published September 18th 2018 by Ecco
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Author	:	Emily Jungmin Yoon
Format	:	ebook 80 pages
Genre	:	Poetry, Race, Cultural, Asia

From Reader Review A Cruelty Special to Our Species: Poems for online ebook

Mya says

An arresting collection that draws attention to individual experiences of Korean women from a not-long-gone past, whose history has been forgotten by contemporary desire to forget humanity’s most inhumane actions. What emerges is a searing and mystifyingly lyrical investigation of Japanese and American acts of colonization and violence against Korean women. Yoon delves deeply into this history while at the same time never letting the reader forget that these stories, though removed, are not irrelevant to our own lives. She traces her own encounters with racism and sexism and their combination in America, offering her own experience as testament to the ways in which the ignored and forgotten history of the women she seeks to give voice to speaks to persisistent exoticism and misogyny present in today’s perception of Asian women.

Keishla says

This was POWERFUL. I felt my anxiety creeping while I read this because of unsettling and horrible some of things these "comfort women" experienced. I was left in physical pain... but there are realities we need to write and read about.

Samantha says

An arresting and moving collection about Korean "comfort women" during WWII that is so well-thought-out and put together, in terms of taking hold of a narrative that hasn't been widely shared (and the importance of that, given the surviving comfort women are in their 90s). And beautifully written, of course.

Emily says

It's been years since I was consistently reading poetry, but I am trying to get back into it. I was a little bit hesitant about accepting A Cruelty Special to Our Species for review, but I am so glad that I did. Emily Jungmin Yoon's collection is heartbreaking and thought-provoking. She pours her heart into these poems, and I loved the honesty.

A lot of these poems cover Korean history, and many of them are about "comfort women", who were trafficked for sex work during WWII. So, trigger warning for everything involved with that because these poems really dig into it. They are unsettling & will stick with you.

These poems take a look at pain - pain from war, pain from relationships, pain from men, and so much more. They are chilling, and I appreciate that I had the opportunity to read them. I would definitely read more from Emily Jungmin Yoon.

Jenna says

I've long known Yoon's work via the poetry salons of New York City as well as via her role as poetry editor for the Asian American Writers Workshop's literary magazine *The Margins*, so I was eager to finally read this.

I've read countless debut poetry collections over the past decade or so with a more-or-less critical eye, and this is one of the strongest debut collections I can remember -- consistently readable, clear, and compelling. You don't have to be steeped in the world of contemporary verse to be able to understand and appreciate this poetry, but if you are thus steeped, you won't find these poems lacking, either. All the poems between these covers feel like finished works, written from a vantage point of authoritative maturity and insight; each poem in the collection is sufficient unto itself, and yet, simultaneously, almost every poem in the collection feels necessary to the whole. The collection is ambitious, tackling a huge, still timely and resonant historical topic: Korean history of the 20th century, with an especial focus on the narratives of the hundreds of thousands of Korean "comfort women" forced to be sex slaves to the Japanese military during World War II. With this topic as her central hub, Yoon branches out in many directions, exploring how this history reverberates across the years, with echoes still audible in the incidents of casual racism and gendered harassment experienced by Asian female immigrants such as Yoon herself today. Yoon's interconnected vision encompasses such wide-ranging topics as: colonialism and the associated erasure of non-western religious and spiritual practices; western portrayals of Korea in media ranging from lurid mid-century pulp novels to the 2014 Hollywood comedy film *The Interview*; wartime rapes during the Korean War; peer pressure on girls to "put out" in teenage dating relationships; street harassment; schoolyard bullying; the unique brand of body image issues faced by Asian American girls; and the challenges inherent in transnational/interracial relationships in a dating scene shadowed by race-based fetishization. The last section of the book pushes Yoon's exploration of violence in all its forms still further, darkly limning how current tensions between Koreans and Filipinos might embody the tendency of violence to beget violence, the tendency of yesterday's victims to become today's victimizers; nodding to racialized police killings in the U.S.; and positing a connection between the previously discussed forms of human-on-human violence and the ongoing environmental destruction that threatens all our futures today (Yoon accomplishes the latter through the motif of woman-metamorphosed-into-whale, magically handled in the two poems "The Transformation" and "Time, in Whales"). Titles of some other poems that stood out to me: "On the Day of the Gyeongju Earthquake, September 12, 2016," "Say Grace," "Hair," and "American Dream" (a poem that subverts the title phrase with more wry irony than I have seen almost anywhere). Also the poem "Autopsy," which first appeared in the *New York Times*, a searing indictment of the human tendency to fail to recognize its own complicity, to be forever protesting its innocence: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/ma...

GHP says

Pure. Fire. Read it.

Kathleen says

Our Q&A for the Poetry Foundation: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/arti...

The poet Emily Jungmin Yoon believes that art reminds us that “dissent can manifest itself in beautiful and

complex forms." Born in Busan, the second-largest city in South Korea, Yoon recently published her debut collection, A Cruelty Special to Our Species (2018). The book focuses on the history of so-called comfort women from Korea and elsewhere in Southeast Asia whom Japanese soldiers detained and forced into sexual slavery before and during World War II. This summer, I corresponded via email with Yoon, who is now earning her PhD in Korean literature at the University of Chicago. We talked about activism, translation, the best place for a US audience to dive into K-pop, and how a poem "is always an opening, a question, and never an answer." The following exchange was condensed and edited.

Your poetry weaves together so many social issues from race to gender and violence to history, and you've participated in such events as Poets for Puerto Rico to raise awareness and funds in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. How do you view the relationship between the arts and political activism?

Art allows the expression of resistance and subversion that circumvents or confronts censorship and control. Artists invent and expand on modes of defiance to amplify their voices and create solidarity. In literature, writers use narratological and stylistic tactics to challenge the mores of their societies—each choice made in the structure, punctuation, perspective, and vocabulary can be a powerfully charged vehicle to convey meaning and intention beyond what the narrative communicates. Readers can discover revolutionary potential in all details of a work of art, which I think can have a mobilizing effect—some may be moved to think about their own ways of expressing or joining in on the resistance, whether they be in the arts, on the streets, or elsewhere. Art not only makes concrete the notion that dissent is possible in times of darkness but also reminds viewers that dissent can manifest itself in beautiful and complex forms. Art is a strategy for political activism.

You've remarked that "A lot of people say poetry is dying, but I think that it's because people think that poetry is out of their reach or irrelevant … especially when times are hard, poetry is most necessary." Why do you believe that, and what role does poetry play in contemporary life?

To continue from the previous response, I do think art is a productive way of expressing dissent. To be even broader, such political potential for art is activated because art is always struggling against or transcending the limitations of society, the body, or even the imagination to find meaning and joy beyond physical experience and knowledge. That struggle does not have to materialize in the form of an "obvious" language of political dissent. Circumlocution, deconstructed language, and unfinished narratives are all welcomed in poetry, and that permits every poem to be a question—every poem is an invitation to a heightened perception of our own existence. People might turn to poems to articulate why and how the world pains them and know that they are not alone in that pain. They might read joyful poems to intentionally deny the world, for a moment, and that's OK.

You point out in your book that in 1991, the year of your birth, Kim Hak-sun became the first former comfort woman to deliver testimony of her life as a sex slave, and the section titled "The Testimonies" draws upon documentary materials from numerous women who endured that experience. What got you interested in this project, and how did you decide to make it the centerpiece of the collection?

I have always been interested in the comfort woman history, but poetry provided another medium through which to talk about it and add to the existing discourse—not really to provide new evidence or facts but to make another way to keep the history alive in our memory. That is the work of reproduction and reflection that art does.

I actually didn't start my manuscript thinking "this is a project about the comfort women," but I ended up writing a lot about them, which also fed into a lot of other poems. So, the poems about the comfort women

are literally and symbolically central to my collection, not only because of the historical significance but also because of the fact that they led to meditations that inspired other poems.

Discussion and acknowledgement of the plight of the comfort women is often met with protest and outrage. Last fall, for instance, the mayor of Osaka, Japan, cut ties with San Francisco after that city allowed a statue commemorating such history to go up. Why is this subject still so contested today, and how do you see your poetry responding to such controversy?

I think the protest and outrage exist because of the postwar narratives that portrayed Japan as the victim. Many scholars on Cold War Japanese cultures would agree that a process of "forgetting" the past took place in Japan to paint the United States as rescuing and converting Japan into a model democratic nation in Asia as part of the greater goal of combating communism and asserting control over the continent. Narrative discourse that challenged this "foundational narrative" was suppressed by both Japan and the US, though of course not without creative dissent and subversion from the people. See Yoshikuni Igarashi's Bodies of Memory (2000) for more on this.

Anyway, I think this rhetoric of "forgetting" the past and rebuilding Japan as a symbol of progress, democracy, and liberation still makes some people refuse to acknowledge the wartime atrocities and colonial traumas that Japan caused in Asia. My poetry aims to reject this denial and reconstruction of comfort women's histories by engaging with, and becoming mouthpieces for, their stories—to add my voice to the conviction that war memories and responsibilities must continue to be articulated and addressed in artistic, scholarly, and community forums and forms.

In your author's note, you make the distinction between "speaking from within, not for, a community" in regard to the testimonies of comfort women, and you assert that "an experience that is not mine is still part of the society and world that I occupy. It is crucial to know, listen, tell, and retell various stories so we may better theorize and understand our existence." Why choose poetry as the genre in which to examine and present these women's histories?

A poem, to me, is always an opening, a question, and never an answer. It does not force an absolute conviction. When I read Mai Der Vang's Afterland (2017), for instance, I feel like a gentle hand reaches toward me to experience a history I did not firsthand live. The lyrical conveyance of historical and emotional information helps me connect the history to mine—to think about the Cold War, immigration, language. ... Even if the book talks about a specific history, it opens my eyes to my own experiences too, and I hope my poems can achieve that effect. I revel in the fact that poetic language, even when uttering a particular experience, even without explicitly aiming to educate, is able to be inclusive and expansive. It's also liberating that poems have no limits in the visual forms that they can take, which have their own representational meanings.

You organize the collection into four sections—"The Charge," "The Testimonies," "The Confessions," and "The After"—and intersperse these with prose poems all titled "An Ordinary Misfortune." How did you settle on this structure? And why did you give all the prose poems the same title, particularly when so many of the misfortunes seem extraordinarily harsh?

I wanted the book to begin with and maintain a strong contextual framing that addresses the history of the comfort women. I also wanted that to be situated alongside other stories of violence and alienation to suggest the continuities of various human cruelties. "The After" hopefully gestures toward more tenderness and futurity in a way that suggests a path that the next book might take but still maintains an emotional and thematic tie to the rest of the book.

I saw the phrase “an ordinary misfortune” quoted in the book The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan (2008), by C. Sarah Soh—the trafficking of female Koreans to become “comfort women” (itself a euphemistic term) for the Japanese Imperial Army was so widespread that it was an “ordinary misfortune.” That striking understatement, in that specific context, really pierced me. My first poem writing about that phrase and the comfort woman history started my whole book, as that poem led to more poems about the history and soon linked itself to other histories of sexual violence. I wanted readers to look at the title again after reading the poem and think critically about how one’s society enables or normalizes those violences.

In the poem “Bell Theory,” the speaker recalls “being laughed at for my clumsy English” and also utters the title phrase, “a cruelty special to our species,” twice. What kindnesses, if any, do you think are “special to our species?”

I think that the human species is capable of intelligently and deftly performing kindness, but I’m not sure if we have kindness that is special to just us. There are other animals with behaviors that humans might identify as “kindness.” That said, I do try to find and appreciate human kindness, even if it’s not special to our species. People fighting to undo or prevent various kinds of harms done by other people give me hope, though again, that’s less a result of a “special” kindness and more of a level of awareness.

You’re the poetry editor of the Margins, the literary magazine of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop (AAWW), whose mission statement explains that “in an age when Asian Americans are relegated to sidekicks, whether in sitcoms or the corridors of power, we believe it’s time to bring Asian Americans into the conversations that matter.” How does your work as an editor impact your work as a poet?

In the US, many people see the term Asian American and envision an East Asian face. East Asian privilege in the discourse of Asian American literature and culture is very real and can be deleterious to fostering pan-Asian solidarity. Institutions that claim an Asian American identity should actively create space to uplift the voices and visions of all Asian Americans, and I believe the folks at AAWW strive for that.

Editing helps me as a poet because, for one, the work really makes me feel like a part of the poetry community even when I’m not writing or attending many literary events. That sense of participation is important to me because it is tough to “feel like a poet” in a non-creative-writing graduate program. Second, perhaps even more significantly, reading also inspires me to write. Sometimes I am driven to abandon academic obligations and just write a poem, and that impulse usually comes when I’m reading. Even jotting down one line while reading gives me a lot of peace and joy.

In your poem “Between Autumn Equinox and Winter Solstice, Today,” you write, “I read a Korean poem / with the line ‘Today you are the youngest / you will ever be.’” You’ve also published some translations. What contemporary or historical Korean poets do you recommend, and are there any you’d like to translate yourself?

I recommend Kim Hyesoon’s books, translated by Don Mee Choi and published by Action Books. The world of Hyesoon is vigorous, intestinal, and irresistible. The Colors of Dawn: Twentieth-Century Korean Poetry (2016), a collection translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé and Chung Eun-Gwi and published by the University of Hawai‘i Press, is also a good introduction to modern and contemporary poetry. I think it would be cool to translate poetry by women poets from the colonial era to trace the history of feminism (by the modern definition) in Korea.

Can you say a bit more about feminism by the modern definition in Korea? What does feminism look like

there, and how does it resemble or differ from feminism elsewhere in the world?

In the modern period, often periodized as being the same as the colonial era, 1910–1945, there was a lively discussion of women's rights and liberation, starting roughly around the 1920s with the discourse on "free love," marriage, and sexuality. It was also a decade in which many prominent writers, not only women writers, were committed to proletarianism and class revolution. The second boom in feminist discourse, literature, and research is thought to have occurred in the 1990s. Both the modern and contemporary investment in feminism can be said to owe somewhat to Western texts and theories, which I imagine one might say about feminisms in other parts of the world, but there are conscious efforts to avoid uncritically taking and applying them to Korean social contexts. People are doing the labor of excavating forgotten or silenced authors and their works to reshape/expand the canon (e.g., Lee Sang-kyung), studying the roots of family ideology (Kwon Myong-A), examining how women poets used poetry to call for gender equality and feminist collectivity (Ku My?ng-suk), etc. Unfortunately, most of these works are not available in English. I presume feminists in other countries are doing the same for their specific societal and cultural realities. I can't say I know much about feminism elsewhere, though, especially because geopolitical disparity functions in a way that makes the production and reception of Western feminism more visible than others.

Now that this book is done, what do you plan to publish next?

I’m actually working on a couple of translation projects! I don't have all the details set yet, but they will be feminist women's writing from Korea. I’d also like to write more poems. I want to work out a schedule to find time to devote to poetry.

When you’re not writing poetry or working on your PhD studies, how best do you like to spend your time?

Eat, go shopping, and Netflix and Chill™—all the better if with loved ones! I also like long baths. My current go-to shows are Terrace House and Queer Eye.

Is there anything I haven’t asked you about that would be your dream question to answer?

I’m not sure if this is my dream question, but I do want to talk about the international popularity of K-pop. What are the implications and consequences of that popularity, say, in America? What does it tell about the relationship between language and sense of belonging? How does it reflect or change expectations about performance of gender? I don’t have clear-cut answers, but I want to talk about transnational phenomena such as this without facing the racist accusation that these interests are frivolous or inane.

If you could recommend one K-pop song to an American audience looking to get into the genre, what would it be?

“Fake Love,” by BTS, not only because it did immensely well in the US and cracked the Top 10 in the Billboard Hot 100 very recently, but also because their choreographies, fashion, and music videos are really interesting. I think boy groups such as BTS can offer a glimpse into how expectations on gender performance and masculinity differ across cultures.

Nhi says

there were several times i wanted to just...close this book, put it out of my mind, forget i ever read it, because

it was just too much. the sorrow, the unresolved grief. speaking of grief here are some lines from one of my favorites:

> Colonial-era Japanese historians were sure
> the white pottery and clothes of Korea show perpetual
> sorrow. Poverty of color, incapacity for pleasure--countless foreign invasions turned the people blank
> and hollow, cursed to eternal mourning.

i'm convinced that poetry is maybe, the closest thing that can put such lasting, searing pain to words.

Katya Kazbek says

I've been dying to read about the tragic history of "comfort women" since I, an immigrant to the US, and not that well-versed on East Asian history, first heard about them on the radio. And this poetry book with an absolutely incomparable name became the unlikely but satisfying read on the subject. I am definitely going to read some non-fiction about "comfort women" later (perhaps the fascinating oral history mentioned in this book's acknowledgements) but meanwhile I just want to reread "A Cruelty Special to Our Species", and to savor all its depth again. It's a short collection, even for a poetry book, but it contains so much truth and pain on origins, race, womanhood, war, alienation, and language. Timeless, relentless and absolutely spectacular. I feel very lucky to have read Emily Jungmin Yoon's poetry this early in this career and will stay on the lookout for more. (We share an agent, apparently, what a treat!)

Matt says

You think you know how cruel humans can be...

and then you hear stories that are bravely, unflinchingly, uncompromisingly told

like this

Jeffrey Parker says

A compelling and powerful collection that centers around the personal history Comfort Women and the continuing impact over generations. But the story is not that simple. These poems show echoes of that impact in the way a young women navigates through the world. These poems show how cheap, trivial, and disgusting a behavior can been when set against the images of this history.

Beyond the subject matter and it's impact, my feelings about the poetry itself are more complicated but largely positive. On the positive side, I know sculpting powerful poems from an historical subject matter,

especially one so personal to the author can be difficult. I thought this was done masterfully. I found myself wanting to keep reading, wanting to continue with the story. At the same time, the poems seemed largely matter-of-fact and I wanted something more, more layers of depth and emotion. But maybe that’s exactly the point. The impact of this history is not just one of disgust and abandonment but also one of cold numbness.

I applaud this powerful and necessary collection.

Jayde Meng says

My favorite poems:
- An Ordinary Misfortune (3): A strong start to the anthology. Interesting transitions and colons.
- An Ordinary Misfortune (11): Nice repetition with a change- reveals each layer to the poem like an onion.
- Kang Duk-kyung (18): This one made me cry. I'm sorry we failed you, Kang Duk-kyung.
- Kim Sang-hi (20): The last four lines are so powerful and the spacing is beautifully done.
- Kim Soon-duk (26): The feeling of helplessness in this is so strong and heartbreaking.
- Fetish (32): This one is hard to understand, but I think that makes it all the more powerful. I'm not sure I truly get it; however, I think it speaks a lot about the human experience of grief and how it may not be as easy to experience as we might think.
- Bell Theory (36): I like this one a lot- maybe because as an Asian American, I can relate to a part of it. I really like how Yoon continues her use of repetitions and colons to create nice transitions and revelations.
- Hair (39): This one hit me hard because I relate to the desperation of assimilation so much. I remember my own sister struggling with her skin tone and clothing when I read this.
- An Ordinary Misfortune (47): "Which war?"- so powerful.
- News (51): Interesting structure. I like the comparison between the apple and the pear and the homonyms. Favorite line: "I am sick of the smiling slices of pear."
- Time, in Whales (66)

Other notes:
This is a book that needs multiple rereads in order to understand every poem to the best of your abilities. A lot of the poems are confusing, and seem to not fit in with the larger theme at all- they have beautiful imagery but may be too vague to discern, which is not necessarily a bad thing.
I like the commentary on American imperialism and how the atrocities during the war weren't just limited to the Japanese- it included the allies as well.
I love how Yoon completes this anthology in a way that combines past with the present- it truly helps to define the ramifications of the war and how it affects the Korean experience to this day. Yoon has an interesting style that sometimes doesn't use line breaks, which helps to present stream of consciousness and more fluid reading. I don't know if it is the stories that make me feel so much or Yoon's beautiful writing, but I love this anthology and the way it presents hard stories for all of us to hear. I think that I definitely need to read up more on comfort women and Korean reunification because this is an issue that needs more exposure in the world.

Andrea Blythe says

My first podcast interview at New Books in Poetry is live!

I had a lovely conversation with Emily Jungmin Yoon regarding her first full-length collection, A Cruelty Special to Our Species (Ecco Books, 2018), which examines forms of violence against women. At its core these poems delve into the lives of Korean comfort women of the 1930s and 40s, reflecting on not only the history of sexual slavery, but also considering its ongoing impact. Her poems beautifully lift the voices of these women, helping to make them heard and remembered — while also providing insight into current events, environmentalism, and her own personal experiences as a woman in the world.

I loved this collection of poetry, which was so moving in how it addressed intense subject matters. Her words are lyrical, vivid, and enriched with a playful examination of language, the way mean slips depending on perspective and how language can be a powerful tool. These poems help to give voice to women whose stories are not commonly told. It's beautifully done.

Clemlucian (🏳??🌈the brooding witch) says

Rating:??????

I’m disappointed. The beginning is good because I wasn’t used to the format or the theme but all the poems say the same thing: Korean women have been through hell.

The poems are shocking and horrible but well written although sometimes I got lost in one but it’s redondant.

Carla Sofia Ferreira says

Absolutely stunning! Listened to this on audiobook & Yoon's reading was gorgeous.
