



# Hardly War

By Don Mee Choi

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*Hardly War*, Don Mee Choi's major second collection, defies history, national identity, and militarism. Using artifacts from Choi's father, a professional photographer during the Korean and Vietnam wars, she combines memoir, image, and opera to explore her paternal relationship and heritage. Here poetry and geopolitics are inseparable twin sisters, conjoined to the belly of a warring empire.

*Like fried potato chips – I believe so,  
utterly so – The hush-hush proving  
ground was utterly proven as history –  
Hardly=History – I believe so, eerily so  
– hush hush – Now watch this  
performance – Bull's-eye – An uncanny  
human understanding on target –  
Absolute=History – loaded with  
terrifying meaning – The Air Force  
doesn't say, hence Ugly=Narration –*

**Don Mee Choi** is the author of *The Morning News Is Exciting* (Action Books, 2010), and translator of contemporary Korean women poets. She has received a Whiting Writers Award and the 2012 Lucien Stryk Translation Prize. Her translation of Kim Hyesoon's *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* (Action Books, 2014) was a finalist for the 2015 PEN Poetry in Translation Award. She was born in Seoul and came to the United States via Hong Kong. She now lives in Seattle, Washington.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

Choi's use of hybrid forms poetry, memoir, opera libretto, images and artifacts from her father's career as a photojournalist in the Korean and Vietnam Wars—lets her explore themes of injustice and empire, history and identity, sifting through the detritus of family, translation, propaganda and dislocation.

**Kathleen Rooney, *The New York Times Sunday Book Review***

Playful and complex...Choi's poetry operates within a tradition of Korean-American experimental poets that includes Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim. Choi's zany take on militarism and the Korean diaspora may seem absurdist, but it is an inventive and daring waltz that upends what is commonly understood as the 'Forgotten War.'

***Publishers Weekly***

While imperial history relishes mythmaking and triumphalism at the expense of the human and psychological costs of war, Choi revels in history's untold spaces.

**Lizzie Tribone, *BOMB***

This book's sort of rogue clarity hinges on the poet's relationship with her father. Essentially, we experience the destabilizing effects of US-ROK entanglement as coherent because this relationship sutures time and space. His award-winning photographs of the war suffuse the pages.

**Caitie Moore, *The Poetry Project Newsletter***

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About the Author

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From **Hardly War**

"Race=Nation"

I was born in a tiny traditional tile-roofed house, a house my father bought with award money he received for his photographs of the April 19, 1960 Revolution. The student-led revolution overthrew the authoritarian South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, installed by the U.S. government in 1948. He tells me even elementary school students came out to join high school and college students in protest, their arms locked shoulder to shoulder. And what he cannot forget are the shoeshine boys, Korean War orphans who eked out a living on the streets of Seoul. Many of them gave up their lives in the uprising. Police opened fire, killing about 180 and wounding thousands. We bade farewell to the house I was born in during the height of the U.S.-backed dictatorship under Park Chung Hee. Even after several decades of living outside of South Korea, this is the house I still return to. It is my psychic and linguistic base, a site of perpetual farewell and return, a site of my political act—translation and writing.

My early education in South Korea trained me to think race as nation and nation as race, hence race=nation. A Korean term, *uri minjok*—our race, our national identity—was imagined, a crucial construction and a mobilizing force in the anti-colonial, independence movement during the Japanese occupation 1910-45. When Korea fell under the control of the U.S. military government in 1945, a part of our race had split off as *ppalgaengi*, Reds or Commies. But really, anyone in “those white pajama things,” traditional pants, which majority of the Koreans wore back then, was seen as a *gook*. This is how a *gook*=nation was born. Our race, our national identity, even our clothing became racialized and geopoliticized within the global class war. Therefore, when I was born in the tiny tile-roofed house, I was already geopolitically raced. Hence, me=*gook*.

While I was growing up in Hong Kong, I saw more of my father's photographs than of my father because he was always away in various war zones. He would bring back photographs of the war he saw, then leave again. He also left us a map, a wall-sized map of Southeast Asia, framed and hung above our dining table, so we could track him across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. What I am attempting to do with my poems and my father's photographs is what I used to do as a child when I stared at my father's photographs and maps—trying to imagine race=nation, its language, its wars. I am trying to fold race into geopolitics and geopolitics into poetry. Hence, geopolitical poetics. It involves disobeying history, severing its ties to power. It strings together the faintly remembered, the faintly imagined, the faintly discarded, which is to say race=nation gets to speak its own faint history in its own faint language. Its mere umbilical cord is hardly attached to anything at all. Hence, hardly=war.

"Woe are you?"

It was hardly war, the hardest of wars. Hardly, hardly. It occurred to me that this particular war was hardly war because of kids, more kids, those poor kids. The kids were hungry until we GIs fed them. We dusted them with DDT. Hardly done. Rehabilitation of Korea that is. It needs chemical fertilizer from the states, power to build things like a country. In the end it was the hardest of wars made up of bubble gum, which GIs had to show those kids how to chew. In no circumstance can man be comfortable without art. They don't want everlasting charity and we are not giving it to them. We are just lending them a hand until they can

stand on their own two feet. A novel idea. This is why it occurred to me that this particular war was hardly war, the hardliest of wars.

My father was hardly himself during the war, then I was born during the era that hardly existed, and, therefore, I hardly existed without DDT. Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing. I prefer a paper closet with real paper dresses in it. To be born hardly, hardly after the hardliest of wars is a matter of debate. Still going forward. We are that is. Napalm again. This is the THE BIG PICTURE. War and its masses. War and its men. War and its machines. Together we form THE BIG PICTURE. From Korea to Germany from Alaska to Puerto Rico. All over the world, the U.S. Army is on the alert to defend our country, you the people against aggression. This is THE BIG PICTURE, an official television report to the nation from the Army. This is Korea! Is one thing better than another? These South Koreans are alright. Woe is you, woe is war, hardly war, woe is me, woe are you? My father is still alive and this is how I came to prefer a paper closet with real paper dresses in it.

from **Purely Illustrative**

"I, Lack-a-daisy"

I, Lack-a-daisy, born two miles from here. Here is DMZ. In fact, I, Lack-a-daisy, born two miles from every place you've been. How orange – yes, ma'am. I, Lack-a-daisy, born two miles from every place you've been, which is known as the human core, which translates to born two miles from every flowering bellybutton. Here is DMZ. Mark-a-daisy. Every belly is a suspect. I, Lack-a-daisy, born two miles from every place, every suspect, every petal kicked open, am deeply moved by world memories. There is no choice in the matter. What are world memories? It turns out that they are war memories. And what are war memories? They are orphan memories. Orphan memories are like the fetuses thrown out in bottles. Fishy smelling blood clots. I, Lack-a-daisy, never saw the fetus-filled bottles with my own eyes, but when you are a little girl, what you hear is as good as seeing with your very own eyes. Here is DMZ. We talk about blood at great length. Fetuses captivate our imagination, particularly orphan fetuses. After all, I, myself, was nearly an orphan fetus. Luckily, I happily survived. I, Lack-a-daisy, thank orphan memories. I'm bloody fetal. I'm purely petal. I'm hardly war. Now, ask me a difficult question. How orange – yes, ma'am. He's my son.

"Daisy Serenade"

- 1 I, Lack-a-daisy=like a daisy=lack a daisy=like a daisy=I, Lack-a-daisy
- 2 Nine nine=mind your daisy=9 9=paisley daisy
- 3 Motherly stamen=style style=overly ovaries!
- 4 O fear veer=you are my Schneewittchen
- 5 Or 0?=Do you know?=O or 5?=Do you know?=Yi Sang knows
- 7 I style stigma=style anther=then sepal ovule=Over
- 6 I sang=I sang=like a daisy
- 6 I fugue=I fugue=like a daisy
- 8 I nearly=narrowly=ovary=Over
- 9 Paisley Daisy
- 9 Oopsy Daisy
- 10 Or Lyndon?
- 9 Or Barry?
- 8 Or Crazy?
- 7 Oxeye Daisy?
- 6 Or I Sang?

- 5 Or London?
- 4 Or Yoke?
- 3 Or Vote?
- 2 Or 18?
- 1 Overly Overly
- 0 We must love one another or die

Beauty=18=18=18=18=18=18=18=18=18=0=Nation

Beauty=4=4=4=4=4=4=4=4=4=4=0=Nation

Beauty=Me=Me=Me=Me=0=Nation

Me=Over

from **Hardly Opera**

Act 1. I was surprised!

*CAMERA ELMAR*

I-like-a I-like-a

I take a look I-like-a

A copy of LIFE magazine

O-Pinkville O-like-Me

As far as war is involved such thing is happening

anywhere any place any nation

I-like-a

*CHORUS (dead orphans of the world)*

Anywhere any place any nation

I-like-a!

*(repeat as an undertone, shaking pine needle branches in their hands*

*chorus is dressed in white—color of death)*

*CAMERA ELMAR*

One day I called my friend's office

O-like-Me O-seaweed

I was surprised!

He was sent to a military training camp

I should have been drafted too but I was younger than him

according to my family registry document

When he came back after Seoul was regained

he rushed to see his family

He arrived with a M1 rifle

wearing a helmet

His neighbors cheered

O-sway-me sway-me O-like-Me.



*CRAZIES (or Eternity)*

Two Reds!  
Terrible acts! Kill Them!

*(shaking red hydrangeas in their hands)*

*CAMERA ELMAR*

O-told-me such a case  
His neighbors grabbed my friend  
and took him to the house  
where the Reds were hiding  
Crushed the gate  
O-a-like-a-like-a

*CRAZIES*

Reds! Reds!

*(shaking red hydrangeas)*

*CHORUS*

Hydrangea agenda!

*(repeat as an undertone)*

*CAMERA ELMAR*

O-crazy-daisy!  
His neighbors grabbed the Reds  
a man and a woman  
O-ringspots!  
Dragged them to the town's storehouse  
O-orphans!

*CRAZIES*

Kill them! Kill them!

*CAMERA ELMAR*

My friend worked for a third-rate newspaper  
I worked for a first-rate newspaper  
O-a-like-a-like-a O-now  
The man trapped in the storehouse worked for  
a second-rate newspaper  
O-bonnet! He was a sports editor!

My friend knew him O-flower!

*CRAZIES*

Kill them! Kill them!

*CAMERA ELMAR*

O-rose-of-sharon!  
Like-a-lily! Luckily, the sports editor  
didn't recognize my friend  
so he shot the two Reds  
the sports editor and the woman  
O-lily-bang-bang!  
Otherwise the crazies  
would have killed my friend  
Such a case countless cases  
O-lily-me

*CHORUS*

O-flower! O-flower!

*(frantically shaking pine needle branches)*

*CRAZIES*

Sports editor! Sports editor!

*(repeat five times and chorus and crazies merge on stage,  
shaking red hydrangeas and pine needle branches)*

\*

Act 2. What's going on? OK OK

*SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

*(a mass of pink hydrangeas in paisley dresses with flowered hats  
sip tea, eat cake, smoke cigarettes through fancy holders, adjust bra straps,  
take notes, etc)*

A funny story which is just another story  
There is only one road from south to north  
Dusty when dry  
Muddy when rainy

*CAMERA ELMAR*

One day during the war I came upon a story  
in Chosôn Daily  
Only a front and back page  
for paper and ink were scarce  
At the bottom of the front page  
there is an editorial usually written  
by a top editor  
something humorous  
something political O-blouse

*SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

Paisley-daisy blousey-daisy

*(sip tea)*

*CAMERA ELMAR*

An American Army major drove down  
from north to south  
he himself alone  
He pulled over because  
he saw a funny looking ceremony  
O-ribbon-bon-bon O-orphans!  
AMERICAN ARMY MAJOR  
What's going on?

*WHITE HYDRANGEAS*

*(in baggy white pajamas)*

OK OK

*AMERICAN ARMY MAJOR*

What's going on?

*SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

OK-bang-bang!

*WHITE HYDRANGEAS*

OK OK

*CAMERA ELMAR*

O-bonnet-bon-bon!  
What's happening was a wedding ceremony

An old custom of Korean farmers  
a strange manner O-pajamas!  
The bridegroom is tied up by his feet  
And hands onto a beam  
Village people whack him with sticks  
O-bon-bon O-bad-guy  
You steal a nice beautiful girl from our village  
It's just a play O-madness

*SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

Paisley-daisy, blousey-daisy

*AMERICAN ARMY MAJOR*

Why are you hitting him?

*WHITE HYDRANGEAS*

OK OK

*AMERICAN ARMY MAJOR*

Is he a communist?

*WHITE HYDRANGEAS*

OK OK

*SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

OK-bang-bang!

Yes, ma'am

*AMERICAN ARMY MAJOR*

A communist! I'll kill him

*HITE HYDRANGEAS*

OK OK

*SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

Yes, ma'am

*CAMERA ELMAR*

He pulled out a 45  
O-Yankee-bon-bon!

### *SWAYING HYDRANGEAS*

Yes, ma'am

### *CAMERA ELMAR*

O-bonnet!  
Suddenly the whole world became quiet  
The major got back into his jeep and drove off  
O-OK-bon-bon OK was still the best word in Vietnam  
O-scribble!

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Catherine Walters:**

Information is provisions for those to get better life, information these days can get by anyone in everywhere. The information can be a expertise or any news even restricted. What people must be consider when those information which is from the former life are challenging to be find than now's taking seriously which one is suitable to believe or which one the resource are convinced. If you get the unstable resource then you get it as your main information you will have huge disadvantage for you. All those possibilities will not happen inside you if you take Hardly War as your daily resource information.

#### **Owen Bourne:**

Hey guys, do you wants to finds a new book to learn? May be the book with the title Hardly War suitable to you? The book was written by popular writer in this era. The particular book untitled Hardly Waris the one of several books this everyone read now. That book was inspired many men and women in the world. When you read this book you will enter the new way of measuring that you ever know ahead of. The author explained their concept in the simple way, and so all of people can easily to know the core of this reserve. This book will give you a lots of information about this world now. In order to see the represented of the world with this book.

#### **Tracy Rendon:**

Reading a reserve can be one of a lot of exercise that everyone in the world likes. Do you like reading book so. There are a lot of reasons why people fantastic. First reading a e-book will give you a lot of new info. When you read a reserve you will get new information simply because book is one of many ways to share the information or even their idea. Second, reading a book will make a person more imaginative. When you looking at a book especially fictional book the author will bring that you imagine the story how the personas do it anything. Third, you are able to share your knowledge to other individuals. When you read this Hardly War, you may tells your family, friends along with soon about yours reserve. Your knowledge can inspire

the mediocre, make them reading a reserve.

**Amy Arwood:**

Reading can called mind hangout, why? Because when you are reading a book specially book entitled Hardly War your mind will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in every aspect that maybe unknown for but surely will end up your mind friends. Imaging each and every word written in a reserve then become one form conclusion and explanation which maybe you never get prior to. The Hardly War giving you an additional experience more than blown away the mind but also giving you useful info for your better life with this era. So now let us teach you the relaxing pattern at this point is your body and mind are going to be pleased when you are finished studying it, like winning a casino game. Do you want to try this extraordinary spending spare time activity?

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