

The Man Who Became a Flamingo (1)

**BY NABILLERA [나빌레라]**

FEBRUARY 28, 2020

anal-

The Man Who Became a Flamingo (1)

Oh Han Ki. Novelist. Analrealist
Translated by Beth Hong

I

Flamingo. Ever since I started to become that red animal, I have been forgetting human language little by little. This may be the last thing I write in human language. Thankfully, as I am recording my thoughts, there has yet to be any problems.

I have not disclosed my identity to anyone. Because of the hassle. Even if you just say you like flamingos, people look at you strangely or inevitably question you further. And I don't even like flamingos. I don't feel any way about them. They're just flamingos.

I once confessed the truth to a girl I liked. At first, she didn't believe me. Later she said I was scaring her and burst into tears. Not long after, she said it was all the fault of my profession as a novelist and told me to pick between them: novels or her. I confess, around that time whenever I had sex with her I was

imagining mating with a female flamingo! Those seductive red cries!

Based on my experience, I feel comfortable hiding myself for many reasons. I hope you don't misunderstand. I am not a pervert, not a drug-addicted artist, not a loony murderer. I am just a flamingo.

My life's goal is survival. I don't want to believe it is this way.

I do not think. I am writing down the flamingo's words.

I am the subject of this text. Loneliness and I.

As I begin to write in earnest, I will write down a few thoughts that have come to me as a human. I don't know if it will help to understand what I write.

George Orwell criticized totalitarianism in *Animal Farm*, and Natsume Soseki pointed out the injustice of human affairs in *I am a Cat*. Karel Čapek wrote in the forward to *War with the Newts*, "I wrote this with humans in mind." Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is so famous there is nothing left to say on the topic. The same can be said of *Conference of Birds and Beasts*, *Aesop's Fables*, and *Journey to the West*. There is no perfect animal story. This story will be the same. However, I am the only one to try their damndest to present to you the words and thoughts of animals as they are.

I still think of *honghak* as red-bodied cranes, and know nothing except for the fact they are ordinarily called "flamingos." At a push, I only know that flamingos eat birds or bugs or crustaceans, sleep standing on one leg, and enjoy communal life. I also have a hazy childhood memory of going to a zoo with my mom and seeing a flamingo show. That's all. Strictly speaking, I have absolutely no interest in those red beasts.

Even though I am turning into an animal, I still have no idea why I happen to be turning into a flamingo. So, there's nothing for it but to write down everything I thought on the border of human and flamingo, in the order that I remember them.

Advertisement

This is where my story ends. From now on, this is the story of a solitary flamingo.

Reproduction

It has been so long since I started turning into a flamingo that I can't remember the exact date. I happened to write a few poems about flamingos then became a flamingo all of sudden. Now that I'm a flamingo, I've started to think it was fortuitous. Especially when I no longer have to strive to play human.

I don't remember where I put those poems from that time, but somehow I can recall the first four lines of one titled "A Flamingo's Daily Routine" perfectly.

My pet flamingo spoke to me
I understood what it said but couldn't write it down
I opened the window and it was the fifth floor
I roused the flamingo from its sleep

I was suddenly struck with fear at the thought that I was no longer human. I thought I needed to work hard to turn myself back. At first, I thought the best thing to do was to visit our family's ancestral graves. So I traveled to and from the gravesite almost every day. It was located on Ganghwa Island. My grandfather died of stomach cancer, and my grandmother died of a stroke. These both happened long ago. My grandfather came down from the North during the war and left behind two wives there. My grandmother was the wife he had in the South.

After I returned from the graves, my certainty that I could not change back grew and I started bowling. I don't even know why I started bowling in order to turn back into a human. Not only that, but the bowling ball was so heavy that I quickly gave up. I don't know why, as usual, but I suddenly thought that to both flamingo and human, bowling was a terribly cruel sport.

After that, I humbly accepted the fact that I would never turn back into a human. From that moment on, I wished that I could hurry up and rid myself of the last of my humanity and fully become a flamingo. This poem, then, came to mind.

Flamingo is forest
Warm wind does not blow in a forest

I recently found a notebook I had lost. In it was a poem. It was a long poem about flamingo reproduction, and there were 149 lines describing a flamingo orgy in human language.

Brain

I live at my uncle's vacation cottages. He died in autumn, the year before last. Childless, he left his cottages to me. His ashes were scattered in the reservoir next to the house. There was no will.

Advertisement

The cottages are simple. There are ten shabby bungalows lined up along the reservoir. A bed, a desk, a window, a closet, a washroom. Each layout is identical.

The tenth room. 110. This is my room. I sleep in this room and take care of the cottages. In my room, I spend most of my time reading or writing. I am trying my best not to forget the language of humans. I don't want to live as pathetically as this, but it seems to come naturally. I don't know exactly what feeling is coming, but if I had to guess, I'd say it is similar to human guilt.

I wrote all my poems about flamingos in this room as well. In room 110, I think as a flamingo and borrow human language to record it. My writing is neither entirely the writing of a flamingo, nor is it entirely the writing of a human. Just as this mysterious writing. 110 is the flamingo's brain.

Just as when I was human, I am male. I have gotten used to almost everything else, but the matter of sexual desire is somewhat disconcerting. I haven't yet been able to escape from my human body, but I no longer desire humans, and while I am naturally attracted to other flamingos, there are no female flamingos nearby. And one more thing: My breeding instincts still come back again and again like those of a human.

Once, I could no longer suppress my lust—I even looked through an animal encyclopedia. A big flamingo. A baby flamingo. Chilean flamingos. James' flamingos. Andes flamingos. Cuban flamingos. Suddenly all the flamingos on the bookshelves began speaking to me.

Korean melon

I could only understand this part. That night I wrote this.

Genital revolution is necessary
The revolution is a Korean melon seed

The next day, I added one more line

Korean melon seeds are not lonely

Zoo

When I could no longer hold back my urges, I took the outer-city bus to the Zoo. On those days, I would wander around in front of the flamingo habitat 'til closing. It was on one such day that I discovered you.

I remember. That day there were around twenty flamingos in the man-made lake inside the enclosure. You were standing apart from them. You had a neck longer than any of the others. Your ruddy feathers wouldn't settle, you were grubby and thin as a rake, but I sensed your elegance and grace.

My lovely lady flamingo. I recognized you at once. I lost myself in watching you. Not long after, you too felt my gaze. We looked into each other's eyes for quite some time.

Advertisement

Who are you? I whispered cautiously so that you wouldn't run away.

You just looked back at me without saying a word.

Who could you possibly be? I asked again.

You looked away. You stared blankly at the surface of the water. You looked briefly at the sky. You slowly re-joined the group. *What misery.* I couldn't touch you without going into the enclosure. After that day, I went to the Zoo often.

Cyclops

The day I saw you, I wrote that down.

Madness and Depression

Once, when I was wandering around the flamingo enclosure, I met an old professor. He had taught me literature when I was in college. It had been a long time since I had left school, but, now, just as he did then, he looked old. The professor was holding hands with a young woman. I asked if she was his granddaughter, and he replied that she was his lover. I told him I was jealous. We laughed for a bit and then shook hands. The professor asked why my hands were so cold and I told him I didn't know. He told me it was like I was a reptile or amphibian. We laughed again.

It was a bright, clear day. Your redness rippled in the sunlight, seducing me. I kept stealing glances at you while talking with the professor. The professor said he couldn't remember the last time they had gone on a date to the zoo. Is that so, I replied. He asked me why I was at the zoo even though I wasn't on a date. I put my brain to work. The professor grinned. I couldn't come up with anything else, so I told him that I sometimes came to the zoo for no particular reason. He told me that I spoke like how I always used to. Then, he started to look at me with a murderous look. The professor's lover looked at me strangely. I saw you, watching the situation with worried eyes from the man-made lake. You were shivering as if struck with fear. You seemed to have picked up on the strange current running between the professor and I. The professor followed my gaze to where you were standing; he may have possibly realized your existence.

*Run. I mouthed to you.
As far away as possible.*

I whispered again. You tried to read my face and plodded your way into the crowd. I could pick you out from the bunch instantly. You were staring back in our direction with anxious eyes.

Unlike what I feared, nothing came of it. I don't remember what we said to each other afterward, but I can still see the professor laughing in front of me. I played along and laughed too. I could hear the sounds the animals were making, I could hear the sounds the people watching the animals were making too. I heard sounds not made by the animals or the people. The professor asked what was going on in my life that made it so hard to see me. I replied that I had been suffering from depression for a long time. The professor nodded, saying he thought so from the story I published recently that was clouded in depression. He said the story was so convoluted it made him dizzy. He told me to quit playing around like that. I told him I wasn't playing. I told him that it may be a habit of mine or just my everyday life. The professor said that depression is a type of self-deception and my stories weren't good. His lover took his words as fact and nodded her head. I zealously asked him, what is a good story and what is a bad one? The professor told me to read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* carefully one more time. Then I'll know. He said that's what a story is. That's what life is. I let the professor's words drift past and looked over at you. I saw you pecking at the ground, eating the food the keeper gave you.

Advertisement

Horse hoof
Lighthouse
Cudgel

These are words that came to mind as I watched you. While I was thinking of these, the professor continued to chatter. He said that if I didn't have the confidence to write a good novel, then I should at least try to earn money by writing one that could be turned into a movie, or just write movie scripts in the first place.

Then what is it that you taught me? I asked.
What did I learn? I asked again.

You aren't even doing it the way I taught you to, anyway. The professor said while laughing. His lover laughed too.

Indolence, moon halo

The flock of flamingos was circling the edge of the man-made pond. You were circling as well, watching me out of the corner of your eye.

Gold. Necklace.

A few days later, the professor called me. He said that madness and depression are infectious and to be careful.

Nuclear Power Plant

Every week, around two people visit a vacation cottage. Most of them are looking for a fishing spot in a reservoir. When they come, I pretend I am not here because I don't want to be discovered as a flamingo. When they leave, I put my guard down and become a flamingo again. I'm safe. Though I'm anxious, I think I'm safe. Even though I'm anxious, I think I'm safe and then shudder with anxiety again. It's a habit.

Fortunately, as time goes by, the number of visitors decreases. This is because of the nuclear power plant across the reservoir. It was constructed after my uncle built the cottage.

The radiation drove people out. People who had lived densely huddled by the stream scattered. Now there was only one store, and the road was completely empty. Many times, I didn't meet a single person while going downtown.

Nuclear power plants are hard to reach because of their high walls and tight security. Steam or radiation accidents happen frequently, so no one wants to get too close. Sometimes corpses are discovered in the thick grasses on the way to the station. In case someone reading this mistakenly thinks that I am mentally unstable, these bodies have nothing to do with me.

I haven't gone to the nuclear power plant either. I've imagined it many times. A leech. A bald female singer. There are also a lot of rumors about the power station. Nuclear power plants multiply like bacteria and float around like ghosts. Actually, the nuclear power plant is an Islamic mosque. It's a space station. I'm on Mars. I'm inside my body. I'm in your heart. I'm lonely. I'm a diving beetle.

Advertisement

My uncle loathed nuclear power plants. Even up until his death, he blamed the nuclear power plant for his lonely life. I think that his death was the price.

A lizard that tramples its own tail
A boy who's biting wild grapes
Destruction and rectangle

Sometimes I write furtively, imagining my uncle's loneliness.

I'm different from my uncle. I like the nuclear power plant. Loneliness. Sadness. Anxiety. The nuclear power plant generates the emotions I need when I write. Even looking at it makes my mind overflow with inspiration.

It also makes me long for you. The day I couldn't go to the zoo I passed the time imagining you, and at some point, I started seeing flamingos near the nuclear power plant. The dim remnants became plausible entities at some point. One day, a flamingo is raising its beak. One day, a few are sleeping in their natural position with one foot raised. One day, a male and female are walking on a fence perilously as if on a tightrope. One day, countless flamingos are sitting on the round roof of a nuclear power plant. One

day, they make a fuss over each other. A goblin. A shadow. Flamingos spread their wings wide open and fly in the sky. A border. An empty bottle. A comet. I haven't seen you yet. No matter how much I imagine you, you don't show yourself easily.

Flamingos rake together mud to form conical nests. After mating, they lay eggs in the nest. Without a nest, there is no flamingo. A nest is the destiny of flamingos.

The nuclear power plant is your nest. I've called the nuclear power plant "a nest" ever since I met you. I call it a true nest. A giant nest. A genuine nest. A beautiful but hideous nest. A nest that is under a curse, a nest that wishes you blessings. A nest where reason and instinct wrestle. A nest where sorrow and rejoice coexist. A nest of oblivion. An explosive nest. A nest that rabbits like. A nest that tastes like spinach. A nest that looks like you.

Other than those, there are many reasons I like a nest that looks great when it smiles.

- () The nest is not logical.
- () The nest wastes time.
- () The nest likes rain.
- () The nest doesn't hate me.
- () The nest is Charles Bukowski.
- () The nest is not deep but firm.
- () The nest doesn't know love.
- () The nest is scientific and not scientific.
- () The nest does not sing.
- () The nest does not talk.
- () The nest has nothing to ask.

Ultimately, the nest that easily feels tired with everything keeps people away from me. I feel uncomfortable being close to people, because flamingos, like most animals, hate people. Thanks to my stubborn nest, I spend my time as a flamingo in peace.

Advertisement

But there's one person who's been interfering with my private life lately. He knocks 110 times every three days. When he comes, I hide the fact that I am a flamingo. I hide that I am alive, that I exist in this world, and that I have hidden.

Even now, he is knocking on my door. I adjust my clothes, collect my breath, and open the door. He is standing. He is a gray-headed old man but has a large body frame. I give human greetings to the old man. The old man smiles faintly and accepts greetings in human language.

An osprey is a natural enemy of flamingo. I call the old man "the Osprey." The first time I saw him, I sensed he was the Osprey. He exudes the aura of an osprey, not that of a man. If he finds out about me, I'll be torn off by his sharp beak and tough claws. I'm furtively looking out for the moment when I can run away from him.

The Osprey dislikes friendly nests as much as my maternal uncle. The Osprey is the owner of a small hamburger restaurant in this neighborhood. Whenever he sees me, he grumbles that he doesn't sell hamburgers as much as he used to. I think the nest that yearns for America has taken away people who eat hamburgers. If he resents such a social nest, he will live a lonely life like my uncle and die for sure.

I remember my uncle told me that the Osprey lost his young daughter in an accident a long time ago and went mad.

Poor old man, my uncle said then.

Useless old people, I mutter, thinking of my uncle and the Osprey.

The Osprey insists that we must join forces to remove the emerald nest. To live like a human being, we must drive out that radioactive mass, he says. As I listen to this indifferently, the Osprey shoots at me. He takes a glance at me from head to toe and then tries to look into my mind. He tries to sneak a peek at the blood of the flamingo in my body, the kind of genes imprinted on my skin.

I'm not a flamingo.

I mutter to hide deeper. Fortunately, the Osprey doesn't doubt my existence yet. Because I pretended to agree with him and signed the petition.

Why does he want to get rid of the spicy nest?

After the Osprey leaves, the question lingers in my head. I'd like to have a couple more nests with acrophobia. Then, like everyone else, the Osprey will give up and disappear.

Without any human interfering in the bluish nest, the whole world would soon be filled with wasps. Then mankind will have nowhere to go and eventually become extinct, and soon an absolute peace will come. I picture in my head a world full of dubious nests. To imagine you laying eggs all over the nests that like to move in herds.

Advertisement

Secret

There are a few more secrets other than those about flamingos. It's a very personal story, but on second thought, there's no need to be ostentatious and call it a secret.

One of the secrets among those: Actually, I had sex for the first time only after 30 years old. It was late compared to my peers. Poets wrote poems about sex. Writers illustrated erotic moments. I envied them, but I rarely had a chance until I was thirty.

However, that I had my first experience late isn't something to hide. Rather, the secret starts here: The sex partner was not a woman. It wasn't even a man. It wasn't a child, nor an old person. The partner was a dog that was raised next door. It was a mixed breed Doberman and Bulldog, a female with a large head and long legs. The dog's name was Virginia.

I'm a lunch delivery boy

My mom packs a lunch box and recites the Lord's Prayer

Full-grown men put grenades in their mouths and go to battle

The man with the bucket on his head is my mother's lover

I walk on a cross-shaped road with a load of lunch boxes

Quince-scented iron pieces fall in the lunch box

The women from the paint factory lie by the grave and wait for me
I choose the woman whose blue paint is around her nipples
She says I'll be a pessimist when I grow up

I pray that I'd receive a jade scarf as a Christmas present
I watch as hope retreats in a shortcut

My mother's lover puts a bucket on me and tells me about her suicide
The world is in the midst of accepting me

I remember the poem I wrote after having sex with Virginia. I don't have romantic feelings and memories of this clumsy poem. For me, sex was despair wearing a bucket upside-down. I didn't show this poem to anyone. You are the first one to read it. What kind of poem would I have written if my first time was with you? I'm a little curious.

Another secret is in the reservoir. I held out until finally I ran out of money and received a guest. In addition to the fishermen, I rent a room to anyone who is being chased by someone or to anyone who is chasing someone. I rent rooms to suspicious men and women, men and men, women and women, and old people and children. They come with secrets to this desolate place. I don't inquire. Of course, I don't confide either.

How about me?

When a customer looks for a woman, I ask. Even if the customer is a woman, I ask. If they want, I lick their genitals and get more money. It doesn't matter to me. Human is a different race to me anyway. Bedding. Hot dog. No, buckwheat. A massager. A microwave.

Advertisement

I sometimes give them a boat ride for money. They fish on the reservoir floating on the boat. They drink or take a nap. They talk or cry about their lives. So far, I haven't felt any particular problem.

How old are you?

What's your name?

Are you married?

Why are you doing this here when you're so young?

I'm not so uncompromising as to annoy people who ask questions like this. You can make up your answers and respond.

The most perplexing thing was when I met someone who had noticed my identity. It happened once. Last fall, a fortune-teller stayed at the cottage. He stayed for three days but didn't come out for two days before getting on the boat on the last day. He said that he's guessing fortunes wrong these days, and so he came here to cool his head. He was a person who pursued or was pursued by fate.

You're a writer, aren't you?

He asked. His guess was wrong. First of all, I'm not a person. And it's not writing, it's just transcribing the flamingo's words. I nodded at ease. He began to tell his story with a smile around his mouth, as if satisfied. I listened to his story and steered the boat.

A shadow of death, he whispered a moment later.

I asked again what he meant.

There's a shadow of death hanging over you.

He looked through me and muttered. He said he could see a huge shadow of death before my destiny. He said I'd kill or get killed in the near future. I was listening to him quietly. He kept talking about my fate with excitement.

You're not a person, right?

At one point he asked, and I looked at him. His face turned ghastly pale. I looked around. There was no one. The flamingos in the twisted nest could not be seen either.

That day I pushed him into the reservoir. This is a secret that no one knows about. His fortune-telling was right.

Now no one knows my fate. I have a lot of secrets.

Sign

This is also a secret, but ever since I became a flamingo, my body has been turning red.

Advertisement

Abnormal: a red human body

Normal: a red flamingo body

A small rash rises all over my body. I scratch my body while reading, writing, sleeping, and eating. At first, I scratched because it itched, but now I scratch my body out of habit and it makes me even itchier. I wrote because I was in pain, but now I feel more pain from writing out of habit. They work in similar ways.

If I scratch, my body starts getting red. I scratch harder. I'm excited when my whole body swells up red. I hum a song. I shake my head. I turn around. I stamp my feet. I dance and stir up my flamingo brain. Next, I look at my swollen red naked body in the mirror. I imagine going to you in this condition.

But I don't have wings yet. I've tried flapping, but I can't fly. I have no feathers. I only have soft skin. I have no beak. Nothing but weak lips. I have a mammal body, which I'm fed up with.

Also, I go to the dermatologist like a human.

You're terminally ill. Now you're a total flamingo.

Because I want to hear this from my doctor.

Your body is exhausted so your immune system is very weak.

But the doctor always makes the same diagnosis of a rash. I say I sleep eight hours a day.

I heard you're a writer. It's probably because you're stressed out from writing.

The doctor talks in a casual manner as if it were no big deal and hands over the same prescription as before. I crumple it up as soon as I get out of the doctor's office. For some reason, I feel that avoiding this medicine can let me become a perfect flamingo. On the other hand, I become miserable when I go to the dermatologist because it occurs to me that I am still a weak human who relies on a doctor's diagnosis. I get uncontrollably depressed on such a day. Still, I feel better when I look at the sad nest while scratching my body. Even not long ago, I came back from the doctor's office and was scratching myself while watching the nest that enjoys telling silly jokes. Flamingos were sitting on the nest that has healthy teeth. No matter how hard I looked for you, you weren't there. I had an erection when I imagined you there and I ejaculated shortly after. I felt like this was a sign that I was becoming a flamingo and was relieved.

Phone Sex

—Male. 24 years old. Taipei. International student. Painter. Born in Malaysia. He died earlier this year. It was ruled a suicide, but it was definitely murder. He was shot in the back alleys of the Jingmei Night Market. I heard a shot in my dream. Five. No, six.

Advertisement

—Female. 37 years old. Taipei. Secretary of Foreign Affairs. Anorexia. Paranoia. She is addicted to cocaine. Goddamn it, so I can't talk to her anymore. She was a good one to talk to.

There are thirty-seven flamingos in Taiwan. Two flamingos live in Taipei. No, they do not live. One is dead and one is a drug addict. A drug addict can't act like a human, so should we say they're dead? Death sentence. Bang. Bang. Bang.

I can exchange telepathy with flamingos. I also exchanged it with the flamingos of Taipei several times. I even met them when they were alive. I went to them or they came to me. I liked talking to them. About politics and literature. About feeding and mating. The conversation flowed very well. We drank tea and ate together. We drank and walked the streets at night. We watched a movie and hugged. They were better than I thought. They were loyal and good. They cried for me and comforted me with all their hearts. They were worth living in the world. Somewhat. Yeah, somewhat like a human being.

But why'd they die? Why did they get addicted to drugs? I know. Because of human limitations. Because he wanted to escape the human race and become a flamingo. On the one hand, they had to admit they're not human, but that would've been hard. Those guys are bound to be shot or addicted to drugs. That doesn't mean they can all be flamingos. They have to have sensitivity and attitude. But those aren't something you can get your hands on just because you want it. It's something that you're born with.

I can't hear what you're saying. Illustrate where you live. I'm not left-handed. I get styes often. I like the times when I can't open my eyes. Even when there's no sty, I close my eyes as if I have a sty. I don't want to fly in the sky or become a tree. I want to live in a zoo. I'm being ostracized here. Maybe he noticed that I wasn't human. Will you wait for me at home? I'm a skinny woman in a blue shirt. I'll be here flapping my wings.

I speak into the telephone. The person on the other side has nothing to say. We were connected randomly through the phone sex company.

You're there, right? I ask.

You are listening to me, no? I ask you again.

I'm actually a flamingo, I say.

The person on the other side still has nothing to say.

This time, shall I tell you about the giant genitalia of the Taiwanese? Why their genitals have become so huge. How Taiwan's flamingos were intimidated with their huge genitals in their mouths, I say again. There are numerous flamingos in this country, too. I sent them telepathically—Die. They sent me telepathically—I'll kill you, I mutter.

I heard the faint sound of my opponent's breath.

*I stole your remains
Flamingos walked out of the bathtub
I quickly got tired of stealing
Then I wandered around Taipei and met two flamingos*

Advertisement

I recite poems as I recall them. My opponent tells me I'm out of my mind. I scream. The other side shrieks. I yell louder. The other side hangs up the phone. *It's not you.*

It's not you.

Flamingo and I

I don't know what flamingos look like
I think flamingos are a bird that cannot fly
I don't think a flamingo has a beak

I gave birth to a daughter and soon to a second daughter
I buried my living daughters in the grave

Do not use

You bastard, the flamingo was a homosexual, The daughters whispered

I wanted to keep this diary as unnoticeable as possible
But I couldn't do that
Because like two daughters, it means nothing

Seesaw
Towel
Where to Use

I can't forget about flamingos
Did I have a mother?
I gave birth to myself
The two daughters gave birth to flamingos

I ate tomato spaghetti with my daughters
I opened the winter quilt and lay down with my daughters
The two daughters asked if flamingos produce milk from their bodies

Continue to “The Man Who Became a Flamingo (2)”

(<https://nabillerakorea.wordpress.com/2020/02/28/the-man-who-became-a-flamingo-2/>).

Advertisement



About Nabillera [나빌레라]

Nabillera: Contemporary Korean Literature [www.NabilleraKorea.com]

🔗 nabillerakorea.wordpress.com

