

The Exploration of Existence and Beyond through Language: CCA's Creative Writing Program Presents Mihee Kim and Rita Stradling

by Isha Tripathi



MFA Writing Student Reading Series: Mihee Kim and Rita Stradling
Monday, February 8, 2021

This event was organized as part of MFA Writing's multi-week reading series that celebrates current students' work.

Mihee Kim (she/they) is an artist, poet, and Managing Director of Kearny Street Workshop, an Asian Pacific American arts nonprofit based in San Francisco. Rita Stradling is the author of *Making Bad Choices*, *The Deception Dance* series, the *Dakota Kekoa* series and *The Fourteen Day Soul Detox* serial. Both Kim and Stradling are MFA candidates at CCA.

The term reading recital often evokes the scene of a warm, cozy room at the back of a book shop where the poet or author's energy can be absorbed. Gathered via little boxes on a screen, the MFA Writing Program's recital on February 8th, featuring Bay Area-based poet Mihee Kim and author Rita Stradling, adapted to the times and took reading recitals to a whole new level. While the digital space was temporary, the event maintained a traditional reading recital's warm, cozy energy that keeps the listener engaged and fosters dialogue between participants and presenters alike.

Kim and Stradling's readings explored the metaphysical, asking: What is the nature of existence? How do texture, materiality, the supernatural, and the spirit world play a role in our reality/presence? An audience member made an off-the-cuff comment about Zoom resembling a seance. This comment became relevant to an event exploring writing about human existence and beyond.

MFA Creative Writing student and moderator Slade Gottlieb introduced CCA MFA Poetry student, artist, and managing director of Kearny Street Workshop, Mihee Kim, whose writing explores ancestry, accumulation, the body, and existence through language. Kim recited one of her most recent poems written in Fibonacci sequence titled *component parts* (2021), named after Danish poet Inger Christensen's poem *Alphabet* (1981). Christensen's poem declares the existence of many different elements and beings of life,

particularly in nature, and Kim's poem turns these components into a proclamation about herself. Where Christensen's poem lists the presence of objects and substances in alphabetical order ("Bracken exists, and blackberries blackberries, bromine exists."), Kim's verse correlates the texture of these elements with her own being: "if I think the color warm lays itself over particulate matter I exist, sticky as molasses I exist." This interrelationship between these two poems creates an interesting dialogue as Kim builds up the anatomy of her presence using Christensen's descriptions of substances and textures.

Gottlieb then introduced second-year CCA MFA Creative Writing student and USA Today Bestselling

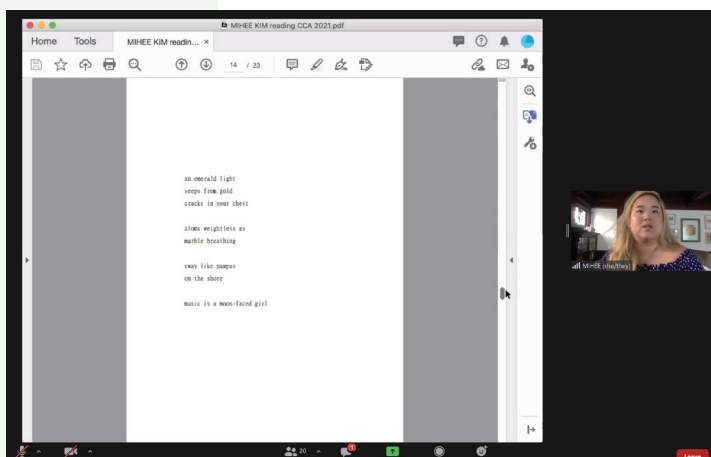


Figure 1. Mihee Kim reading from *component parts*.

author Rita Stradling. Stradling's writing centers around the Dark Fantasy genre, exploring the supernatural, the paranormal, and fantasy world-building. Her work is mainly directed towards adults who have a love for teen paranormal books. Stradling recited an excerpt from the first chapter of her 2019 book,

Midnight Secrets. The story focuses on January, a teenage vampire-girl on the quest for blood. After awakening to discover she has died and turned into a vampire, a complicated romantic relationship develops with her "blood dealer." The excerpt begins with a humorous and witty line: "Ever since I was small, my mother said that life sucked and then you died... After today I was starting to think that my mother was a drunken prophet. She got it backward though. I died and now I have to suck... blood." Stradling takes us on a journey with January frantically on the search for blood as she wakes up to a barely readable note nestled in her palm warning her that she is now a vampire and that she needs to call a number for blood; otherwise, she will have to kill people for it. This chapter's start is

impressive because it begins with a statement about life's almost pointless and mundane existence, contrasting with January's rebirth after death leading to a more exciting life. It appears as though she already has some existential angst, which becomes magnified once she realizes she is no longer human. It reminds me of the beginning of an episode from the teen-drama series, *Vampire Diaries*.

Stradling expressed her love of mythology and folklore from all over the world. In *Midnight Secrets*, she intertwines Irish folklore with her own dystopian and horror-esque world. She takes popular tropes in the literary world like stories about vampires and werewolves and applies her own interests to them, incorporating these particular conventions that people recognize.

After both writers finished their recitals, Kim was asked about her influences: "There is a contextual nature of all work, and we absorb and analyze material based on what we bring to the table as an audience. This is true because we connect with what interests us as people and this, I think, is the foundation of an inspiration and influence." Gottlieb then asked Stradling about her process and what she is working on: "I'm currently working on two separate narratives and a lot of the time I stop one project and start a new one, complete that and go back to the first one." This seems to be a common occurrence in the creative process because it can be helpful to have multiple projects going at the same time and to be able to come back to a project that wasn't working with fresh eyes.

Kim and Stradling's writings both explore existence, though through vastly different frameworks. Kim's poetry is explicitly about human existence, identity, and the body, as heard in her poem *component parts*. Stradling's dark fantasy also thinks through existence and beyond through the supernatural and paranormal realms, almost as an escape from human existence. This relationship between the work of these two talented female writers made it a fascinating contrast and pairing when listening to both of them recite and discuss their work, because they both explore the human condition and what it means to be alive, but they also explore the abstraction and spirituality of our existence correlating it to substances, texture, and otherworldly creatures and building new worlds for it using their own unique voices.

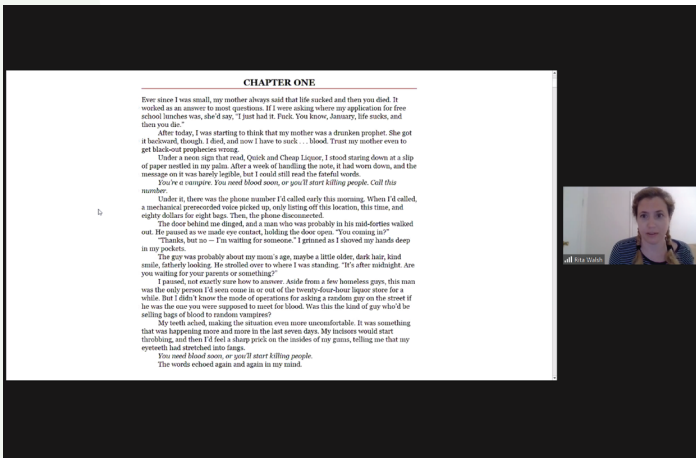


Figure 2. Rita Stradling reading an excerpt from *Midnight Secrets*.

Isha Tripathi is an interdisciplinary artist who primarily works with drawing, painting and photography. She is currently pursuing a BFA in Painting and Drawing at CCA.



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