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The Value of a Heart:
An Interview with an Onion



English 210: Introduction to Poetry

Professor Stephen Johnson

February 22, 2011




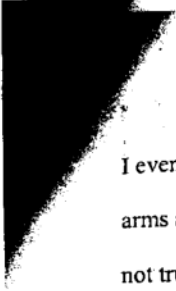
In Suji Kwock Kim's *Monologue for an Onion*, we have the pleasure of meeting an onion who has some pretty strong feelings about the human race. However, after reading this monologue, we are left with many questions regarding the intentions and the implications made by this vegetable. I have tracked down the onion at the local supermarket, in order to ask it some questions.

In your monologue, you use some very harsh words like "idiot", "slashing", and "stinging", yet you start your monologue with the phrase, "I don't mean to make you cry." Why do you start your monologue this way and then go on describing images of violence? How is that logical?

Personally, I thought that the opening line was funny. Humans often tear up- if not cry- when they chop onions; it's a chemical reaction. Opening my monologue with this kind of humor was intentional because I didn't want to create a mood that was too somber and ominous directly from the start. As for the words I chose, I think that they are solely reflective of the actions used when humans chop an onion. How else could using a knife be described? I will admit, however, that the word "idiot" is a harsh one. That point in the monologue is where it turns from a sort of desperation and confusion as to why a human might tear away my layers to a tone of anger and criticism.

It is obvious that you hold a sharp criticism against humans. A few examples are lines 14 and 15 where you say, "From things, ruin and tears your only signs/ Of progress?" as well as lines 20 and 21, "Of things, hungry to know where meaning/ Lies," and furthermore in lines 27 and 28 where you accuse humans of having "A core that is/ Not one." What gives you the right, as an onion, to be justified in your criticism of humans?

As I say in the monologue, "I am pure onion- pure onion/ of outside and in, surface and secret core" (8-9). As a vegetable, I am only onion. I have neither human arms nor legs, neither human lungs nor human liver. I have only onion parts. My cells are like plant cells, with cellulose and organelles, but visibly, all I am is onion layers. I do not present myself any differently than being an onion. Sitting in the grocery store, you know I am an onion when you look at me, when you feel me, and when you smell me.



I even only taste of onion. There is nothing superficial about myself. Humans, on the other hand, have arms and legs, lungs and livers, and somatic cells. But more than that, they put up an appearance that is not true to their selves. Their hearts reflect different emotions, beliefs, and desires than their faces. I am able to criticize that aspect of humanness because I am not human. I do not see the need for false appearances. If you peel away all my layers, you will only come to find an onion heart.

The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío once wrote, "Happy is the tree that has hardly any emotion/ and even more the hard rock, because it doesn't feel/ therefore there is no pain greater than the pain to be alive/ nor greater sorrow than the conscious life" (1-4). Being an onion, like a tree, you are not living as a human is living. Do you think of this as an advantage, as Darío does? In other words, if you could live as a human, would you choose to?


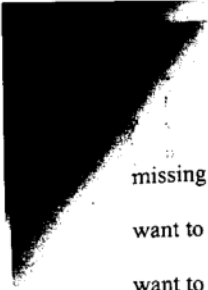
I would not want to live as a "poor deluded human" (5). I do not wish to be subject to the kind of world humans are subjected to. It seems as though humans are always looking for meaning. They chop at onions, hoping to find something greater underneath the layers. Humans mold themselves based on what is around them; humans are easily influenced by love and by deeper meanings. I criticize, "You [human] changed yourself: you are not who you are," (24). I can tell you that I would not want to live a life where I change myself because of what other people think, where I become something other than what I truly am, an onion. So yes, Darío has it right, that plants and rocks- and vegetables, I might add- are happier because they do not feel emotions like jealousy, greed, curiosity.

You've said many times that being an onion is a great advantage, especially in this monologue. However, I would argue that it would be possible for other vegetables to write a monologue and have it come off in much the same way. In fact, an artichoke has a physical heart that humans seek out and eat. Onions don't have an actual heart in that sense, just a core. Do you think that an artichoke would be a better fit for this monologue? If not, what makes you more adequate than this artichoke?

I would like to think that I am the best vegetable for this monologue. A lot of the monologue is referring to "slashing away skin after skin" which seems like a unique analogy to an onion (13). Yet, you raise a valid point. Onions do not have a heart like an artichoke. But I feel as though, for me, the idea of having so many layers of pure onion is interesting in the comparison of vegetables and humans. I mentioned before that it seems as though humans are constantly seeking some deeper meaning. Whether it be within the depths of an onion or within the depths of each other, humans never seem to be satisfied with what they can see or what they know. Why does a human insist on continuing peeling the onion's layers? Is the human constantly looking for "signs/ Of progress" (15)? Peeling an onion is a pointless action, if you're in search of something. All you're going to end up with is "Yellow peels, my stinging shreds" (22). What good is that? Whereas, if a human peels an artichoke apart, they are rewarded with the delicious artichoke heart. There is a point to the slashing and chopping. The idea of the chopping having a purpose defeats almost the whole point of my monologue.

What, then, would you say the point of your monologue is? In your final stanza you say, "Poor fool, you are divided at the heart/ Lost in its maze of chambers, blood, and love/ A heart that will one day beat you to death" (28-30). We have established that you find being an onion better than being a human for many reasons. You have also mentioned that humans are easily influenced by love. If that is true, would you want, if you were able, to love? Furthermore, I challenge you, what good is having an onion heart?

"Whatever you [human] meant to love, in meaning to/ You changed yourself," I said before, and I'll say it again (23-24). I do not think I would wish to love like a human because in loving, a human is transformed into someone else. Being an onion, I have this great ability of staying true to myself, which is something I value and would not necessarily want to give up. I would say that the best part about having an onion heart is that it is stable, consistent, and true. No, I am not able to love as a human may love, but I am also not exposed to the hurt and change that comes with a human being in love. I do not think that I'd want to, as I've said, subject myself to that kind of identity crisis. I enjoy knowing what I am, even if it means that I can achieve no more. Perhaps, it is my loss in not having the ability to love. Perhaps I am



missing out on something great. Perhaps I should wish that I could have a heart like a human. I don't want to say that I would certainly not want to love, but the question still looms in my mind: why would I want to be like a human, where my whole world is striving for something greater than what I already have, even if I'm happy with what I have? An onion heart can be good if it is left as an onion heart, not strewn into pieces and not cooked. As a whole onion, I am a complete version of myself. It is not until a human chops me apart that I become any different version of myself. That is something I don't have control over. My own heart will not beat me to death; instead, a human will chop me to death. Even then, it is obvious that I am onion parts. I would say that having an onion heart is the same as having a pure heart that is reflective of the rest of my self. I am identical, through and through; I am genuine. In a sense, isn't that what everybody is striving for?



[REDACTED]

Stephen Johnson

Intro to Poetry

February 22, 2011

Interview with an Onion *title?*

An onion is a pretty bold vegetable: its taste is strong, harsh, and distinct. However, its taste has nothing on its words. This veggie has some pretty vicious evaluations of those who bring a knife to him. In Suji Kwock Kim's "Monologue for an Onion," one particular onion speaks his mind—and he doesn't hold back. I got the chance to interview this layered, husked guy with hopes of gaining some insight to his choleric, yet also somewhat piteous disposition concerning a human. What I came to learn is that although an onion's layers may be the same all the way through, there is a lot of meaning behind each layer of its acumen.

Danielle: *As I read your words, I couldn't help but notice your rather, shall we say, mocking tone. However, I feel as your poem progressed, this tone gained more and more acerbity; as you grew more caustic your direction seemed to alter slightly. Was this intentional? If so, why?*

Onion: Yes, I definitely had a motive in my tone and directness. I start the poem somewhat gently, telling this person who is to take me apart that "I don't mean to make [him] cry." (Line 1) My tone is less affected, yet I appear as something definite in the stanza. By the end of the poem I have completely removed mention of myself from the words. This is because this poem is not about me. The subject matter is actually the person carrying out my destruction. This is why my tone becomes increasingly direct and brusque: the further this person is destroying me, the further they are mutilating what they are truly seeking. In my first three stanzas, I include myself, personifying myself with words such as "body," "flesh," "skin," and "heart." (Lines 3, 5.

6, 8) However, in the fourth stanza, I try to create a bit of a tonal shift—I am now dissecting the person as he rips me apart. I take myself, per se, temporarily out of the poem, as I critique this person's actions. In doing so, my tone becomes exceedingly more aggressive. I call the person an "idiot," (Line 10) and I berate his pursuits. Then, by the seventh stanza I reintroduce myself in an attempt to get this person to realize the elusiveness of the object of the pursuit (an onion); and finally I conclude this poem by directly criticizing the person in order for him to realize the subject of his true pursuit—that which lies within himself.

Danielle: *So, if you're saying that this is really just about something that lies within this person, then what is this thing?*


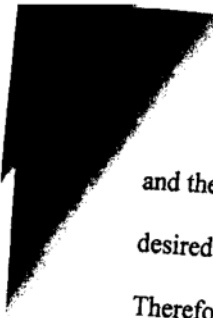
Onion: What this person is seeking is truth. He is on a relentless search for a truth that is within his own heart, something that defines his own personal meaning. However, this truth is merely only what *he* perceives as truth, because truth is all in perception.

Danielle: *If truth is within this man, and this is his supreme desire, then why do you think his pursuit is representative in chopping you up?*

Onion: When I say in the very beginning, "I mean nothing," (Line 2) I have a dual purpose in saying this. Firstly, I wish to convey that I have no intention to harm, "I don't *mean* to make [him] cry." (Line 1) But beyond my intentions toward the human, I also am saying that I don't *mean* anything, or signify anything, at all. I am nothing. That's just it. This human is ripping me apart, piece by piece, but it is simply a demonstration of what he is doing to himself.

Danielle: *Yet this person clearly doesn't realize that this is what they are doing, is this because his world is "glimpsed through veils" (Line 16-17), as you say?*

Onion: Well, here's how I like to think of it: when he cuts me up, my "tears cloud [his] eyes as the table fills." (Line 4) Consequently, the more he breaks me down, the more I cloud his eyes,




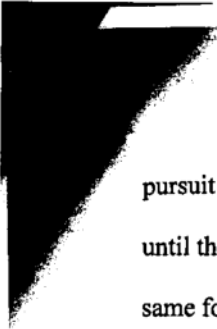
and the less he can see me. This is the veil he creates. The veil is the fictitious concept of a desired truth. Actual truth is found within everyone, and everyone has a different truth. Therefore, the truth, being within you, is right in front of you. This is why I urge this human to "taste what [he] hold[s] in [his] hands." (Line 21) He cannot see this meaning, he has to "taste," or feel what is within him.

Danielle: *But wait, isn't love something one feels within, as a truth singular to himself? In Lines 23 and 24 you accuse this person in saying "Whatever you meant to love, in meaning to/You changed yourself: you are not who you are." What do mean by this?*

Onion: I agree with you in that love is a feeling and a truth that is singular to oneself. Thus, it is something without intention. Feelings are the intrinsic reactions of one's heart; thereupon, one cannot intend or "mean to love." This exploits the very essence of love. In the effort to fabricate a feeling one begins to fabricate a façade from their intention. Accordingly, one will become something that they are not—the outward part of the human will also be beneath a deceptive veil that deludes their own projected truth.

Danielle: *So, ultimately, do you feel a constant pursuit for a palpable understanding of truth will lead one to lose their individual perception of truth? Why do you think that seeking this will consequentially result in a "maze of chambers" in a "heart that will one day beat [us] to death?" (Lines 29 and 30)*

Onion: I say that this human's heart will "beat" him to death because in trying to break down everything that surrounds him in a search that will never lead him to find what he desires, he is losing himself. He has changed, and he has lost his own truth by looking for it elsewhere. This is torturous to his individual meaning; he is "beating" up his truth. Ironically, his truth is in his heart. While he is on this relentless pursuit his heart is all the while beating, and because this



pursuit destroys what he seeks he will never be able to succeed. Inevitably, his heart will beat until the end of his search—his life, and then his heart will have beat until his death. This is the same for everyone. All human hearts beat to keep you alive, until one day your heart simply ceases to continue beating. If we destroy what is at the heart of us by fussing in realms that merely reveal a “fantasy of truth,” (Line 11) then the loss of our individuality is imminent. Each human must find the actual truth that is singular to them. You must stop dissecting a desired fabricated truth, because that will be as elusive as the eyesight is when it is clouded by my acrid juice.