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THE WHITE BOOK, HAN KANG (2017) (TRANS. DEBORAH SMITH)

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STUCK INSIDE

Her life is slow, silent and emotional. And so Han Kang begins by making a list: '[s]alt, snow, ice, moon, rice, waves [...]' with every word she is gripped by 'a ripple of agitation'. An agitation that comes from too long focusing on too little; an agitation that few of her readers will understand. There is an aura of misfortune to Kang and her writing. The sense that none of this was ever meant to happen. The embodiment of a parochial punk rock band inventively tapping away in a parent's garage; no real sense of rebellion about them, just a different way of valuing music. Those unique sounds, originally intended for few ears (perhaps just their own) unexpectedly catch fire. Surrounded by pawing fans, the band whose very act of making music ran deliberately away from the mainstream, now feel betrayed by their own success. They have a choice: keep playing up to this new audience, or dig back inside themselves and with every new song force their accidental listenership to understand they are not of the same mind, that they are connected only by mishap; that *their* actual *people* are few and marginal.

Han Kang has played both sides of this game. *The Vegetarian* (2016) was her surprising break-out album, and quite right too. There has been enough said about this book, except from the hassle she must have suffered trying to get disoriented publishers to take her seriously. Skim-reading reviewers and holiday readers always seem to think the title says it all, or at least most of it. Koreans – despite their wealth – still feel the cultural lessons of starvation and poverty, and so the act of eating meat means a little more than it might elsewhere. The luxury of previous generations passes-down free of its original meaning, but significant, defining, and with a nationalistic prominence nonetheless. True enough, vegetarianism in Korea has the stigma of leprosy, and is about as explainable to the confused as quantum mechanics to the uninitiated. From the outside this fact is certainly enough to write a book, but Han Kang isn't bothered with audiences and saleability (at least she wasn't at this point).

The extraordinary thing here isn't the concept, but the rare, isolated head-space capable of seeing the twists and turns, or filling out her characters the way she does. The reader is left confident that Kang must have lived it somehow, that she is one of the central protagonists; it just doesn't make sense that she could have imagined this. *The Vegetarian* is unthinkable. *The White Book* isn't. It is odd, and it is Kang back to being herself, but it is also more careful

and flirts more with cliché than it should. This is Han Kang in rehab. Our proverbial punk rockers, succumbing to their own celebrity, and tumbling into dangerous indulgences, lose sight of who they are and begin making music for their new fans; the new albums sells, but they are diminished. And so *The White Book* is a return to origins, and truth. The sell-out moment and the 'drug-induced' low point was her second novel, *Human Acts* (2017), a walk-through of the 1980 Gwangju Massacre.¹ Her mistake here was to think that a good idea was enough to make a good book. The authenticity was gone, replaced by a commercially appealing subject, and nothing else in between. In every direction it felt forced: not a book she *had* to write, but one that she felt people *wanted* to read.

The White Book starts with a little throat clearing: 'I felt that yes, I needed to write this book, and that the process of writing it would be transformative, would itself transform, into something like white ointment applied to swelling, like gauze laid over a wound. Something I needed' (5–6). A good start towards redemption, but the transformation that Kang has in mind is personal and unspoken. The trauma of her troubled middle act isn't the explicit motivation, but if it gets her back to her own voice, and I assume the reason she picked up a pen in the first place, then who really cares! The best passage of prose is the first three-page chapter, 'Door'; it is also the most compelling. Our author is moving into a new apartment, 'number, 301' and the first order of business is to paint over the flakes and rust and to erase this 'vestige of violence, like long-dried bloodstains, hardened, reddish-black'. It is snowing outside, and stood there as a '*dumb witness*', she begins to colour it white.

When you are told something is important, the tendency is to believe it. But just what import the colour white has here, never really comes through, never really convinces. That opening list of white objects – '[s]alt, snow, ice, moon, rice, waves [...]' – might to certain ears sound noteworthy, but then what about those items further down: 'white bird', 'white dog', 'white hair'. An honest look at the early flashes here would make most people admit that the author is in a different world to them; that a white dog is just another dog. This gap will slowly fill itself in, but not all the way; and things are downhill – if only slightly – from here. When Kang stops meditating on all things white, she begins to drip feed the reader into her grief, and the reason she *had* to write this book: '[m]y mother's first child died, I was told, less than two hours into life'.

For God's sake don't die, she muttered in a thin voice, over and over like a mantra. After an hour had passed, the baby's tight sealed eyelids abruptly unsealed. As my mother's eyes met those of her child, her lips twitched again. For God's sake don't die. Around an hour later, the baby was dead.

(18)

Is this enough to make someone run away to a foreign country (decades later), quarantine themselves in a rented apartment and tumble endlessly around thoughts of white? Perhaps not for most people, but with Han Kang her mind and her subject matter bleed together. It is weepy and unrelatable, yet she still takes us there... somehow; feeling every unusual overwrought emotion as she does. It can't be a nice place to live, everything is uncontrollable, and with each upside you are just 'holding your breath, and waiting for the next fog'. This nervousness perforates the language itself – bouncing around, every thought is only partially conceived; a stream of sometimes lucid, sometimes

1. The Gwangju Massacre was a brutal crackdown by the Chun Doo-hwan government on civilian pro-democracy protestors in the southern Korean city of Gwangju, between 18 May and 27 May 1980.

2. In the 1968
 – deliberately
 experimental – Beatles
 song ‘Revolution 9’
 (from the White Album),
 the phrase ‘number
 9’ is simply repeated
 over-and-over again,
 backed up by a collage
 of distorted, echoing
 sound effects.

messy feelings. This mix of poetry and prose, and with no chapter longer than three pages, has the feel of a writer’s diary; those daily scribbles – unrelated to a specific project – that just feel too good for the trash can. But instead of sitting patiently on them and waiting for an appropriate moment somewhere down the line, we are instead being asked to accept them, standalone. Our punk rock band are now overcompensating, losing themselves again, this time with experimental and half-baked tones – the Beatles repeating number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9...²

Now I will give you white things,
 What is white, though may yet be sullied;
 Only white things will I give.
 No longer will I question
 Whether I should give this life to you.

(40)

Let me dare to say it – the emperor has no clothes here. This is not raw or creative, this is cringe worthy. Everyone who has ever put pen to paper has written such things, only for friends, editors and concerned onlookers to rightly say that it reads a little affected, and that the meaning the author can see just isn’t translating. In places like this, and with the reuse of sentences, what we are being sold is not worthy of a first draft. ‘Now I will give you white things’? Well not too hard when it’s winter outside. Even when Kang spreads her gaze a little, what meaning are we supposed to find in the act of noticing crystals, salt, ash, lights, power, bones, flashes, skin, paint, fur, water, clouds, moon, bedsheets, sunlight, snow, frost, ice, flakes, blizzard, sleet or sugar? This is our band dabbling in modern art, building installations and renting gallery space – sure enough the crowds flood in and lavish their praise. Proud of their talent, the band heads out for lunch, only to find – on their return – those same people gathered around an errant coffee cup that one of them left on the ground. Pictures being snapped, and everyone frozen in deep contemplation, talking in pompous tones about the ‘fantastic dimensions’, the use of ‘negative space’ and the ‘minimalist insight’.

So we get a hackneyed title, regular photographs, lists of objects and pages printed with the whitest possible tone. In short, gimmicks. And sadly none of this is needed. Within *The White Book* is a lesson for those who want to be writers, and a warning for those who think it will be fun. Kang lives in silence, walks the streets to watch others and magnifies her pain whenever she can – ‘[s]een from behind, men and women bundled up in heavy coats are saturated with a mute presentiment, that of people beginning to endure’ (47). A solitary life, made exciting – and in good measure intolerable – only by her mind. Another Korean writer with a similar trajectory to fame – as well as similar recent problems of style – Kim Young-ha, has explained that you can’t really write a piece of fiction until you have lived it countless times in your mind, until the characters become real and capable of interacting with you: ‘[t]hey’ll talk, won’t they? Your characters, I mean. You need to be quiet and just listen to them’ (Kim 2017: 236). Life lost in a dream.

This is where Han Kang finds her voice – in unnoticed details and untamed imagination, bordering on hallucination. At the furthest possible distance from the unoriginal and the mundane. Take this near impossible to conceive, and haunting thought on her mother’s grief, copied in full from the page/chapter ‘Breast milk’:

The twenty-two-year-old woman lies alone in the house. Saturday morning, with the first frost still clinging to the grass, her twenty-five-year-old husband goes up a mountain with a spade to bury the baby who was born yesterday. The woman's puffy eyes will not open properly. The various hinges of her body ache, swollen knuckles smart. And then, for the first time, she feels warmth flood into her chest. She sits up, clumsily squeezes her breast. First a watery, yellowish trickle, then smooth white milk.

(35)

In these uncomfortable moments, you can see the author who wrote *The Vegetarian* – when she slows things down, when the language normalizes, Kang is back to herself. Nothing is rushed, symbolism isn't forced, it just eases itself over the reader and introverts them to her thoughts. But when someone is *trying* to be poetic, they are often just being pretentious, and Kang too often loses herself in striving to be evocative; talking unnecessarily about the 'glittering immensity' of things. Too often words repeat, as do sentences – '[d]on't die. For God's sake don't die' – chapters/pages like 'Laughing whitely' are pure, and unrefined, trial-and-error (in this case, just a dictionary definition of sorts), and the list continues to pile up haphazardly graceful, sacred, beauty, sterile, soul, calm, bathed, scoured, clean, rejuvenation, revivification, blood, pain, perfection, precious, isolated and reanimated. Worse, the same literary device that sent *Human Acts* so far off course – '*ghosts*' – returns; itself repeating unconsciously throughout. By the time that Kang writes '[a]fter white clothes dissolve into the air this way, a spirit will wear them. Do we really believe that?' or starts one of her chapters with '[w]ere spirits to exist', no one is holding their breath anymore. The answer is already obvious – she clearly thinks they do, and the reader knows by the reiterative pattern what is about to come (in this case only a page later): 'I thought of you. If you can come to us now, then do. Slip on those clothes that the fire has borne you, like slipping on a pair of a [sic] wings' (151).

None of it is needed. Verses like this:

And she frequently forgot,
That her body (all our bodies) is a house of sand.
That it had shattered and is still shattering
Slipping stubbornly through fingers.

(107)

Is said so much better in prose like this:

Looking at herself in the mirror, she never forgot that death was hovering behind that face. Faint yet tenacious, like black writing bleeding through thin paper.

(119)

Han Kang doesn't need gimmicks or the repetition of sentiment. When she writes like this, it stands alone and echoes with the reader. And that is the tragedy here, in places *The White Book* is just so well done, it catches you, takes you out of your life, into the author's grief, and her nervous hang-ups. Martin Amis has said that writing is largely a process of deciding what to leave out,³ and Kang – because she isn't writing a conventional novel – hasn't written

3. Martin Amis, 'The rub of time'. *Prose and Politics*. 29 March 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMZdSVJPZnU>.

enough here, nor left enough out to make this work as it could. This book doesn't quite hit, but only because it isn't really a book. It is a meditation, a diary, a stream of consciousness, a collection of notes, a mix of styles; an experiment. In being bold, Kang deserves credit, and like a dislocated sequel there are plenty of flirtatious hints back towards the peculiarities of the central character in *The Vegetarian* damaged by the sensations around her – '[t]he low air pressure gave her frequent headaches' – and oddly fascinated by the body – '[a]nklebone and kneebone. Collarbone and rib. Breastbone and crossbar bone, another name for collarbone. That human beings are also constructed of something other than flesh and muscle seemed to her like a strange stroke of luck' (105).

Han Kang will have to be slower and less deliberate in her next book. She will have to produce something that doesn't first require a recognition of her fame before it can draw applause. Moments of eye-opening prose are not enough to sustain the wave she is on, and it's a game of diminishing returns. Let's hope our punk rock band turns its back on fame and the allure of the fawning crowds. Selling the mansion, they move back into their parent's garage with nothing but the same instruments and motivation that got them started... and a little more coherence. No understanding that anything they write will be heard outside those walls; no money to be made, no glory, no awards. A return to art for its own sake. Let's hope that the series of empty white pages at the end of this book is the last stunt before a return to the literature that made Han Kang so good in the first place.

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