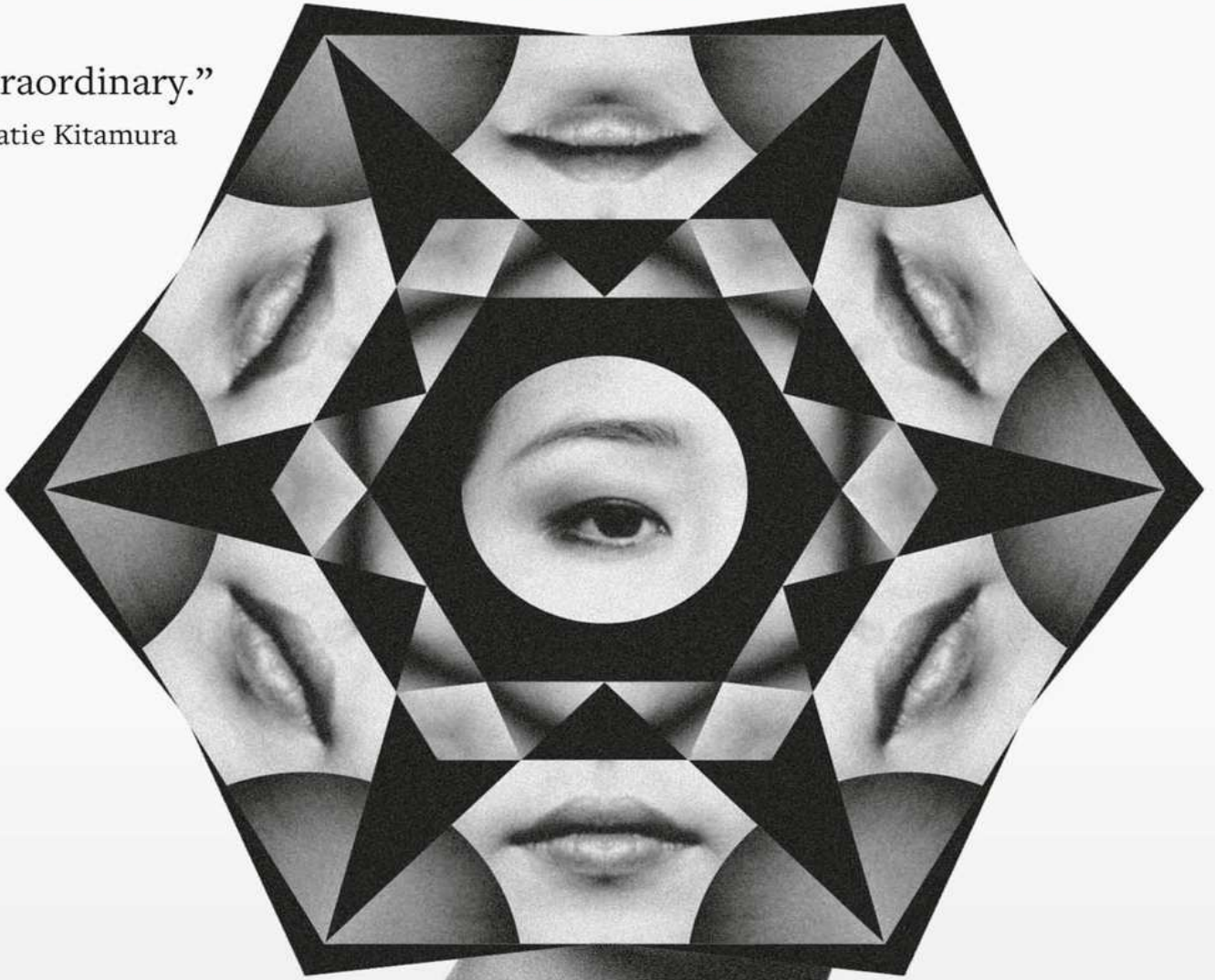


GREEK LESSONS

A NOVEL

“Extraordinary.”

—Katie Kitamura



HOGARTH



BY THE AUTHOR OF
THE VEGETARIAN

HAN KANG

TRANSLATED BY DEBORAH SMITH AND EMILY YAE WON

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A Novel

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HOGARTH
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Acknowledgments

Also by Han Kang

About the Author

143148854

As his dying wish, Borges requested the epitaph “He took the sword and laid the naked metal between them.” He asked this of María Kodama, his beautiful, younger wife and literary secretary, who had married Borges two months before he died, at the age of eighty-seven. He chose Geneva as the place of his passing: it was the city where he had spent his youth and where he now wanted to be buried.

One researcher described that epitaph as “a blue-steel symbol.” For him, the image of the blade was the key that would unlock the significance of Borges’s writing—the knife that divides Borges’s style from conventional literary realism—whereas for me, it seemed an extremely quiet and private confession.

The line was a quotation from a Norse saga. On the first night a man and a woman spent together (which, in this saga, was also to be their last), a sword was placed between them and left there until dawn. If that “blue-steel” blade was not the blindness that lay between the aging Borges and the world, then what was it?

Though I’d traveled to Switzerland, I didn’t visit Geneva. I had no strong desire to see his grave firsthand. Instead, I looked around the library of Saint Gall, which he would have found endlessly enrapturing had he seen it (I recall the rough feeling of the felt slippers that visitors were given in order to protect the thousand-year-old library’s floor), caught a boat at the wharf in Lucerne and floated through the valleys of ice-covered Alps until dusk.

I didn't take any photographs. The sights were recorded only in my eyes. The sounds, smells and tactile sensations that a camera cannot capture in any case were impressed on my ears, nose, face and hands. There was not yet a knife between me and the world, so at the time this was enough.

Silence

The woman brings her hands together in front of her chest. Frowns, and looks up at the blackboard.

“Okay, read it out,” the man with the thick-lensed, silver-rimmed spectacles says with a smile.

The woman’s lips twitch. She moistens her lower lip with the tip of her tongue. In front of her chest, her hands are quietly restless. She opens her mouth, and closes it again. She holds her breath, then exhales deeply. The man steps back toward the blackboard and patiently asks her again to read.

The woman’s eyelids tremble. Like insects’ wings rubbing briskly together. The woman closes her eyes, reopens them. As if she hopes in the moment of opening her eyes to find herself transported to some other location.

The man readjusts his glasses, his fingers thickly floured with white chalk.

“Come on now, out loud.”

The woman wears a high-necked black sweater and black trousers. The jacket she’s hung on her chair is black, and the scarf she’s put in her big, black cloth bag is knitted from black wool. Above that somber uniform, which makes it seem as if she’s just come from a funeral, her face is thin and drawn, like the elongated features of certain clay sculptures.

She is a woman neither young nor particularly beautiful. Her eyes have an intelligent look, but the constant spasming of her eyelids makes this hard to perceive. Her back and shoulders are permanently drawn in, as though she is seeking refuge inside her black clothes, and her fingernails are

clipped back severely. Around her left wrist is a dark purple velvet hairband, the solitary point of color on an otherwise monochrome figure.

“Let’s all read it together.” The man cannot wait for the woman any longer. He moves his gaze over the baby-faced university student who sits in the same row as the woman, the middle-aged man half hidden behind a pillar and the well-set-up young man sitting by the window, slouching in his chair.

“Emos, hēmeteros. ‘My,’ ‘our.’” The three students read, their voices low and shy. “Sos, humeteros. ‘Your’ singular, ‘your’ plural.”

The man standing by the blackboard looks to be in his mid to late thirties. He is slight, with eyebrows like bold accents over his eyes and a deep groove at the base of his nose. A faint smile of restrained emotion plays around his mouth. His dark brown corduroy jacket has fawn-colored leather elbow patches. The sleeves are a bit short, exposing his wrists. The woman gazes up at the scar that runs in a slender pale curve from the edge of his left eyelid to the edge of his mouth. When she’d seen it in their first lesson, she’d thought of it as marking where tears had once flowed.

Behind thick, pale green lenses, the man’s eyes are fixed on the woman’s tightly shut mouth. The smile vanishes. His expression stiffens. He turns to the blackboard and dashes off a short sentence in Ancient Greek. Before he has time to add the diacritical marks, the chalk snaps and both halves fall to the floor.

•

Late spring of the previous year, the woman had herself been standing at a blackboard, one chalk-dusted hand pressed against it. When a minute or so had passed and she was still unable to produce the next word, her students had started to shift in their seats and mutter among themselves. Glaring fiercely, she saw neither students, nor ceiling, nor window, only the empty air in front of her.

“Are you okay, seonsaengnim?” asked the young woman with the curly hair and sweet eyes who sat at the very front of the class. The woman had tried to force a smile, but all that happened was that her eyelids spasmed

for a while. Trembling lips pressed firmly together, she muttered to herself from somewhere deeper than her tongue and throat: *It's come back.*

The students, a little over forty in number, looked at each other with raised eyebrows. *What's she up to?* Whispered questions spread from desk to desk. The only thing she was able to do was to walk calmly out of the classroom. Exerting herself, she managed it. The moment she stepped out into the corridor, the hushed whispers became clamorous, as though amplified through a loudspeaker, swallowing the sound her shoes made against the stone floor.

After graduating from university the woman had worked first for a book publisher and then at an editorial and production company for a little over six years; and after that she spent close to seven years lecturing in literature at a couple of universities and an arts secondary school in and around the capital. She produced three collections of serious poetry, which came out at three- or four-year intervals, and for several years had contributed a column to a fortnightly literary review. Recently, as one of the founding members of a culture magazine whose title had yet to be decided, she'd been attending editorial meetings every Wednesday afternoon.

Now that it had come back, she had no choice but to abandon all such things.

There had been no indication that it might happen, and there was no reason why it should have happened.

Of course, it was true that she'd lost her mother six months previously, divorced several years earlier still, had eventually lost custody of her eight-year-old son, and it was coming on five months since he had moved in with her ex-husband, after a prolonged battle in the courts. The grey-haired psychotherapist she'd seen once a week because of insomnia after the boy's departure couldn't understand why she denied such clear causes.

No, she wrote, using the blank paper left out on the table. *It isn't as simple as that.*

That was their final session. Psychotherapy conducted through writing took too long, with too much scope for misunderstanding. She politely

turned down his proposal to introduce her to a speech and language therapist. More than anything else, she lacked the finances to continue with such expensive treatment.

•

As a young girl, the woman had apparently been “really bright”—something that her mother, during her final year of cancer treatment, had taken every opportunity to remind the woman of. As though, before she died, this was the one thing she had to make absolutely clear.

When it came to language, that label might have been true. By the age of four, and without being taught, she had a good grasp of Hangul. Knowing nothing of consonants and vowels, she’d memorized syllables as entire units. The year she turned six, her elder brother gave her an explanation of Hangul’s structure, parroting what his teacher had said. As she listened, everything had seemed vague, yet she ended up spending that entire afternoon in early spring squatting in the yard, preoccupied by thoughts of consonants and vowels. That was when she discovered the subtle difference between the sound as pronounced in the word , na, and when pronounced in , nih; after that, she realized sounded different in , sah, than it did in , shi. Making a mental run-through of all the possible diphthong combinations, she found that the only one that didn’t exist in her language was , ih, combined with , eu, and in that order, which was why there was no way of writing it.

Those trivial discoveries had been for her so freshly exciting and shocking that when, more than thirty years later, the therapist asked her about her most vivid memory, what came to mind was none other than the sunlight that had beaten down on the yard that day. The increasing heat on her back and the nape of her neck. The letters she had scratched in the dirt with a stick. The wondrous promise of the phonemes, which had combined so tenuously.

After starting primary school, she began jotting down vocabulary in the back of her diary. With neither purpose nor context, merely a list of words

that had made a deep impression on her; among them, the one she valued the most was . On the page, this single-syllable word resembled an old pagoda: , the foundation, , the main body, , the upper section. She liked the feeling when she pronounced it: — — , s-u-p, the sensation of first pursing her lips, and then slowly, carefully releasing the air. And then of the lips closing. A word completed through silence. Entranced by this word in which pronunciation, meaning and form were all wrapped around in stillness, she wrote: . . *Woods*.

And yet, despite her mother's remembering her as "really bright," no one had noticed her through primary and middle school. She wasn't a troublemaker, and her grades were not remarkable. Yes, she did have a few friends, but there was no socializing outside school. The only time she spent in front of the mirror was when she was washing her face; she wasn't excitable like other schoolgirls, and vague longings for romance practically never troubled her. Once the day's lessons were over, she would head to the local library and read a book unrelated to schoolwork, take a few books home with her, curl up under her blanket and fall asleep while reading. The only person who knew that her life was split violently in two was she herself. The words she'd jotted down in the back of her diary wriggled about of their own volition to form unfamiliar sentences. Now and then, words would thrust their way into her sleep like skewers, startling her awake several times a night. She got less and less sleep, was increasingly overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, and sometimes an inexplicable pain burned against her solar plexus like a metal brand.

The most agonizing thing was how horrifyingly distinct the words sounded when she opened her mouth and pushed them out one by one. Even the most nondescript phrase outlined completeness and incompleteness, truth and lies, beauty and ugliness, with the cold clarity of ice. Spun out white as spider's silk from her tongue and by her hand, those sentences were shameful. She wanted to vomit. She wanted to scream.

It first happened in the winter when she'd just turned sixteen. The language that had pricked and confined her like clothing made from a thousand needles abruptly disappeared. Words still reached her ears, but now a thick,

dense layer of air buffered the space between her cochleas and brain. Wrapped in that foggy silence, the memories of the tongue and lips that had been used to pronounce, of the hand that had firmly gripped the pencil, grew remote. She no longer thought in language. She moved without language and understood without language—as it had been before she learned to speak, no, before she had obtained life, silence, absorbing the flow of time like balls of cotton, enveloped her body both outside and in.

The psychiatrist, to whom her alarmed mother had taken her, gave her tablets that she hid under her tongue and later buried in the flowerbed at home, and two seasons went by with her squatting in that corner of the yard where she'd long ago got her head around consonants and vowels, soaking up the afternoon sunlight. Before summer arrived, the nape of her neck was already tanned dark, and an angry-looking rash broke out on the base of her nose, which was permanently slick with sweat. By the time dark red stamens began to sprout from the salvia in the flowerbed, nourished by her buried medicine, a consultation between the psychiatrist and her mother resulted in her being sent back to school. It was clear that being cooped up at home hadn't helped, and she mustn't fall behind her peers.

The state high school that she was entering for the first time, months after the letter announcing the new school year beginning in March had arrived at their door, was a dreary, intimidating place. The classes were already far advanced. The teachers were imperious regardless of age. None of her peers showed any interest in a girl who spoke not a single word from morning to evening. When she was called on to read from a textbook or when the students were told to count out loud during PE, she would look vacantly up at the teachers and, without exception, be sent to the back of the classroom or have her cheek slapped.

Despite what her psychiatrist and mother had hoped, the stimulus of social interaction couldn't fracture her silence. Instead a brighter and more concentrated stillness filled the dark clay jar of her body. In the crowded streets on the way home, she walked weightless, as though moving encased in a huge soap bubble. Inside this gleaming quiet, which was like gazing up at the surface from under water, cars roared thunderously by and pedestrians' elbows jabbed her in the shoulders and arms, then vanished.

After a long time had passed, she began to wonder.

What if that perfectly ordinary French word, in that perfectly ordinary lesson, that winter just before the holidays, hadn't sparked something in her? What if she hadn't inadvertently remembered language, like remembering the existence of an atrophied organ?

Why French and not, say, Classical Chinese or English, might have been because of the novelty of it, because it was a language she could opt to learn now that she was in secondary school. Her gaze had lifted blankly to the blackboard as usual, but there it had snagged on something. The short, balding French teacher was pointing to the word as he pronounced it. Caught off guard, she found her lips trembling into motion like a child's. *Bibliothèque*. The mumbled sound came from a place deeper than tongue and throat.

There was no way she could have known how important that moment was.

The terror was still only vague, the pain hesitant to reveal its burning circuit from the depths of silence. Where spelling, phonemes and loose meaning met, a slow-burning fuse of elation and transgression was lit.

•

The woman rests both hands on the desk. Her posture stiff, she bows as though she is a child waiting to have her fingernails examined. She listens to the man's voice filling the lecture room.

"In addition to the passive and the active voice, there is a third voice in Ancient Greek, which I explained briefly in the previous lesson, yes?"

The young man sitting in the same row as the woman nods emphatically. He's a second-year philosophy student, whose rounded cheeks give him the air of a smart, mischievous kid.

The woman turns to look over toward the window. Her gaze passes over the profile of the postgraduate student, who scraped a pass in pre-med but didn't have it in him to be responsible for the lives of others, so gave it up to study the history of medicine. He's big and has a chubby, double-chinned face, round, black, horn-rimmed glasses, and at first glance appears easy-going. He spends every break with the young philosophy

student—they bat silly jokes back and forth in ringing voices. But the instant the lesson begins, his attitude changes. Anyone can see how tense he is, terrified of making a mistake.

“This voice, which we call the middle voice, expresses an action that relates to the subject reflexively.”

Outside the second-floor window, sporadic points of orange illuminate the bleak low-rise buildings. The young broadleaf trees hide the bare outline of their skinny black branches in the darkness. Her gaze passes silently over the desolate scene, the frightened features of the postgrad student, the pale wrists of the Greek lecturer.

Unlike before, the silence that has now returned after a period of twenty years is neither warm, nor dense, nor bright. If that original silence had been similar to that which exists before birth, this new silence is more like that which follows death. Whereas in the past she had been submerged under water, staring up at the glimmering world above, she now seems to have become a shadow, riding on the cold hard surface of walls and bare ground, an outside observer of a life contained in an enormous water tank. She can hear and read every single word, but her lips won't crack open to emit sound. Like a shadow bereft of physical form, like the hollow interior of a dead tree, like that dark blank interstitial space between one meteor and another, it is a bitter, thin silence.

Twenty years ago, she had failed to predict that an unfamiliar language, one with little or no resemblance to her mother tongue, would break her own silence. She has chosen to learn Ancient Greek at this private academy because she wants to reclaim language of her own volition. She is almost entirely uninterested in the literature of Homer, Plato and Herodotus, or the literature of the later period, written in demotic Greek, which her fellow students wish to read in the original. Had a lecture course been offered in Burmese or Sanskrit, languages that use an even more unfamiliar script, she would have chosen them instead.

“For example, using the verb ‘to buy’ in the middle voice, ‘I buy X for myself’ ultimately means ‘I have X.’ The verb ‘to love’ rendered in the

middle voice, ‘X is loved,’ ultimately means X affects me. There is an expression in English, ‘He killed himself,’ right? Ancient Greek doesn’t need to say ‘himself’—if we use the middle voice, the same meaning can be expressed in a single word. Like this,” the lecturer says, and writes on the blackboard: ἀπήγξατο.

Musing over the letters on the blackboard, she picks up her pencil and writes the word in her notebook. She hasn’t come across a language with such intricate rules before. The verbs change their form according to, variously: the subject’s case, gender and number; the mood; the tense, of which there are various grades; and the voice, of which there are three distinct types. But it is thanks to these unusually elaborate and meticulous rules that the individual sentences are, in fact, simple and clear. There is no need to specify the subject, or even to keep to a strict word order. This one word—modified to denote that the subject is a singular, third-person male; the tense perfect, meaning it describes something that occurred at some point in the past; and the voice middle—has compressed within it the meaning “He had at one time tried to kill himself.”

Around the period her child—the child she had borne eight years ago and for whom she had now been deemed unfit to care—first learned to speak, she had dreamed of a single word in which all human language was encompassed. It was a nightmare so vivid as to leave her back drenched in sweat. One single word, bonded with a tremendous density and gravity. A language that would, the moment someone opened their mouth and pronounced it, explode and expand as all matter had at the universe’s beginning. Every time she put her tired, fretful child to bed and drifted into a light sleep herself, she would dream that the immense crystallized mass of all language was being primed like an ice-cold explosive in the center of her hot heart, encased in her pulsing ventricles.

She bites down on that sensation, the mere memory of which is chilling, and writes: ἀπήγξατο.

A language as cold and hard as a pillar of ice.

A language that does not wait to be combined with any other prior to use, a supremely self-sufficient language.

A language that can part the lips only after irrevocably determining causality and manner.

•

The night is disturbed.

The roar of engines from a motorway half a block away makes incisions in her eardrums like countless skate blades on ice.

The lily magnolia, lit by the glow from the street lights, scatters its bruised petals to the winds. She walks past the voluptuous blooms straining the branches and through the spring night air, which is thick with an anticipatory sweetness of crushed petals. She occasionally raises her hands to her face, despite the knowledge that her cheeks are dry.

Passing by the mailbox, which is stuffed full with leaflets and tax notices, she slides the key into the lock of the ground-floor front door, a ponderous, enduring presence next to the cold gleam of the lift.

The flat is filled with traces of the child, things she'd refused to put away, convinced that one more court proceeding would be sufficient to get him back. The low bookcase next to the old velvet sofa is stuffed full of picture books they began reading together when he was two, while various Lego bricks are kept in corrugated-cardboard boxes decorated with animal stickers.

She'd chosen this place many years ago, on the ground floor so her son could play freely. But he had shown no desire to stamp his feet or run about. When she told him it was okay to use the skipping rope in the living room, he asked, "But won't it be noisy for the worms and snails?"

He was small for his age, and delicately built. A scary scene in a book he was reading would raise his temperature past one hundred degrees, and if he was feeling anxious about something he would vomit or get diarrhea. Because he was both the eldest grandson by the first-born son and the only male child on his father's side, because he was not so very young anymore,

because her ex-husband unswervingly maintained that she was too highly strung and that this was a bad influence on the boy—the records of the psychiatric treatment she'd received in her teens were presented as evidence—because her income, compared with her husband's—he had recently been promoted to the bank's head office—was both paltry and irregular, the hearing eventually resulted in a comprehensive defeat. Now, since even that meager salary was no longer forthcoming, mounting a further case was impossible.

•

She sits down on the raised step inside her front door without removing her shoes. She puts her bag down beside her, which contains the thick Greek textbook and dictionary, her exercise book and a flat pencil case. She keeps her eyes closed and waits until the yellow sensor light switches off. Once it goes dark, she opens her eyes. She looks at the black furniture hunkered down in the darkness, the black curtain, the black veranda sunk in stillness. Very slowly, she opens her lips, then presses them together.

The lit fuse of the chilly explosive primed in her heart is no more. The interior of her mouth is as empty as the veins through which the blood no longer flows, it is as empty as a lift shaft where the lift has ceased to operate. She wipes her cheeks, dry as ever, with the back of her hand.

If only she'd made a map of the route her tears used to take.

If only she'd used a needle to engrave pinpricks, or even just traces of blood, over the route where the words used to flow.

But, she mutters, from a place deeper than tongue and throat, that was too terrible a route.

It was the beginning of the summer when I was fifteen.

It was a Sunday night, and the full moon kept on being momentarily veiled by the grey, uneven cloud cover. I was walking along the darkened road, looking up at that full moon, which was like a silver spoon that no amount of polishing will make shine. A moment came when the lunar halo, which was like a mysterious, disquieting code, spread a purple circle over the clouds.

There were at most three bus stops on the road from the house in Suyuri to the crossroads just off the April 19th Revolution Cemetery, but I walked so slowly that it took me an awfully long time. By the time I reached the corner bookshop, the television screens in the display window of the TV and radio store were showing the start of the nine o'clock news. When I entered the shop, the owner, a middle-aged man with broad, flat suspenders over his wrinkled grey shirt, was just getting ready to close up. I asked him to give me five minutes, and hastily scanned the bookshelves for anything that might catch my eye. One of the books I picked up then was none other than the one I'm holding now, a pocketbook translation of Borges's public lectures on Buddhism.

At the time, my impression of Buddhism was entirely gleaned from what I remembered from the Buddha's Birthday Festival I'd attended a fortnight before with my mother and younger sister. That day and night, I had witnessed a spectacle that, all things considered, could be called the most visually stunning of my as-yet short life. Lanterns festooned with petals individually fashioned from reddish-purple Korean paper were swinging in sunlight in the front courtyard of the temple's main hall. To mark the occasion, the temple distributed meals of fairly bland noodles,

which we ate in the shade of the zelkova tree, in front of the offering space, before settling down and waiting for it to get dark. When the paper lanterns were eventually lit, I was enraptured, robbed of my senses—the reds and whites of hundreds of hanji lanterns swaying row upon row in the inky darkness, warm candlelight seeping serenely out from inside. “We have to go home now,” my mother insisted, but I was rooted to the spot.

On the Sunday morning when my mother announced that our family had to leave Korea in two months’ time, why was it that the image of those lanterns came so clearly to my mind? Despite being vaguely aware that whatever impression those lights had made on me was not quite the same as religious awe, that night when I went to buy an elementary German textbook and conversation tape with the generous amount of cash my mother handed me, I greedily clutched the *Sutta-Nipāta*, *Dharmapada*, *Hwaeom Sutra Lectures* and *Yeolbangyeong Lectures*, which had brick-pattern covers and were published by Hyeonamsa. I must have cherished some kind of nebulous and superstitious hope that transporting these books halfway around the world to Germany would keep the fate of my family safe.

This slim volume of Borges made its way on to the list because of my pragmatic expectation that, insofar as it had been written by a Westerner, it would act as a very basic primer. At the time, I didn’t pay much attention to the photo of him with his eyes half closed, hands clasped in front of his chest as though praying or regretting, reproduced in black and white on the upper section of the green cover.

I read those books slowly and repeatedly during the seventeen years I spent in Germany. Some nights, wanting nothing more than to run my eyes over the familiar contours of Hangul, I would sit a good long while with an open book and not turn a single page. Whichever book I opened, I could feel again the cool air of that early-summer night in Suyuri. It was down to those books that I managed not to forget the moon that had been like a tarnished silver spoon, its purple halo that had seemed a mysterious premonition of some unsettling happening.