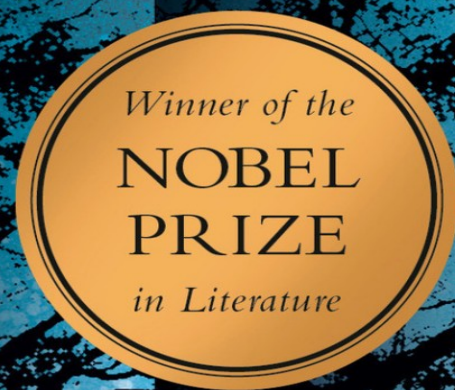


"UNFORGETTABLE."—HERNAN DIAZ

WE DO NOT PART

A Novel



HOGARTH

AUTHOR OF *THE VEGETARIAN*

WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE

HAN KANG

TRANSLATED BY E. YAEWON AND PAIGE ANIYAH MORRIS

ALSO BY HAN KANG

The Vegetarian

Human Acts

The White Book

Greek Lessons



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NOT PART

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A NOVEL

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AND PAIGE ANIYAH MORRIS



HOGARTH
LONDON / NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

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PART I: BIRD

1 CRYSTALS

2 THREADS

3 HEAVY SNOW

4 BIRDS

5 REMAINING LIGHT

6 TREES

PART II: NIGHT

1 WE DO NOT PART

2 SHADOWS

3 WIND

4 STILLNESS

5 DESCENT

6 THE DEEP SEA

PART III: FLAME

About the Author

About the Translators



PART I

.....
BIRD



CRYSTALS

A sparse snow was falling.

I stood on flat land that edged up a low hill. Along the brow of this hill and down its visible face to the seam of the plain, thousands of black tree trunks jutted from the earth. They varied in height, like a crowd of people ranging in age, and were about as thick as railway sleepers, though nowhere near as straight. Stooped and listing, they gave the impression of a thousand men, women, and haggard children huddling in the snow.

Was this a graveyard? I wondered. Are these gravestones?

I walked past the torsos—treetops lopped off, exposed cross sections stippled with snowflakes that resembled salt crystals; I passed the prostrating barrows behind them. My feet stilled as I noticed the sensation of water underfoot. That's strange, I thought. Within moments the water was up to my ankles. I looked back. What I saw astonished me: the far horizon turned out to be the shoreline. And the sea was crashing in.

The words tumbled from my lips: Who would bury people in such a place?

The current was strong. Had the tide surged in and out like this each day? Were the lower mounds hollowed out, the bones long since swept away?

There was no time. The graves already underwater were out of reach, but the remains higher up the slope, I needed to move them to safety. Now, before the sea encroached further. But how? There was no one around. I had no shovel. How would I

get to them all? At a loss, I ran through the thicket of black trees, knees cleaving the rising water.

When I opened my eyes, the day had yet to break. The snowy field, the black torsos, the flood tide were gone; the only thing that met my stare was the window of my darkened room. I shut my eyes. Another dream about G—, it had to be. At this thought, I covered my lids with the cold palm of my hand and lay there unmoving.

.....

The dream had come to me in the summer of 2014, a couple of months after the publication of my book about the massacre in G—. Over the next four years, it had never occurred to me to question the dream's connection to that city. But this summer I began to wonder if there might be something more to it. If my quick, intuitive conclusion had either been in error or an oversimplification.

The sweltering night heat hadn't let up for three weeks. Once again, I was lying under the broken air conditioner in my sitting room, hoping for sleep. I'd already taken several cold showers, but though I lay on the bare floor, my sweat-drenched body wouldn't cool. Finally, around five in the morning, the temperature began to drop. It was to be a brief grace, as the sun would be up in another half hour. But I felt I might sleep at last, and had in fact nearly drifted off, when the plain rolled in beneath my closed lids: snow scattering over rows of black timber; glimmering snowflakes studding the severed torsos like salt; all of it before my eyes, as vivid as day.

I don't know what set it off, the shaking. My body seemed to be racked by sobs, though my eyes remained dry. Was this terror? Or anxiety, agitation, perhaps an abrupt anguish? No, it was a bone-chilling awareness. That a giant, invisible knife—the weight of its heavy blade beyond any human capacity to wield it—hung in the air, with me as its target. As I lay pinned and staring.

The black-blue sea billowing in to dredge the bones away from beneath the mounds—it occurred to me for the first time that this might not be an allusion to the massacred people and the decades that followed. It could simply be a personal omen.

Yes, perhaps that landscape of flooded graves and silent headstones was an intimation brought forward in time, a sign of what remained of my life to come.

This very moment, in other words.

.....

In the four years between the first time I had the dream and that early summer morning, I had parted ways with several people in my life. Some of these partings had been by choice, while others had caught me entirely unawares; I'd fought the latter with everything I had. If, as various ancient faiths say, there exists in a celestial realm or a netherworld an immense mirror that observes and logs everyone's movements, I'm sure the last three to four years of my life as recorded there must resemble a snail coming out of its shell to push along a knife's edge. A body desiring to live. A body pricked and nicked. A body spurning, embracing, clinging. A body kneeling. A body entreating. A body seeping blood or pus or tears.

Then in late spring of this year, with the struggle done, I had signed the lease on a flat in an open-corridor apartment complex just outside Seoul. I had no one left to take care of and no job to get to, though it would take a while for this fact to sink in. I'd worked for many years to make a living and support my family. This had always been the priority. If I wrote at all, it was by cutting back on sleep while nursing a secret hope that one day I'd be given as much time as I desired to write. But by spring any such longing had vanished.

I let my things lie wherever the movers had blithely unpacked them, and spent most of my time in bed, though I barely slept. This went on until July. I didn't cook. I didn't venture outside. I subsisted on water and small quantities of rice and white kimchi that I ordered online and had delivered, and when the migraines and abdominal spasms hit, I vomited up what I had eaten. I'd already sat down one night and written out a will. In a letter that simply began *Please see to the following*, I had briefly noted which box in which drawer held my bank books, certificate of insurance, and lease agreement, how much of my money I wished to be spent to what end, and to

whom the rest of my savings should be delivered. As for the person who was to carry out this request, I drew a blank, and the space where the name of the recipient should go remained empty. I couldn't decide who, if anyone, deserved such an imposition. I tried adding a word or two of thanks and apology by saying I'd make sure to compensate them for their trouble and specifying an amount, but I still couldn't settle on a name.

What finally roused me out of the mire of my bed, after weeks of struggling to sleep, was my sense of responsibility toward this unidentified recipient. Calling to mind my few acquaintances, one of whom, though the exact person was yet to be determined, would be left to deal with any loose ends, I started putting the flat in order. The rows of empty water bottles in the kitchen, the clothing and blankets that were sure to be a nuisance, any personal records, diaries, and notes had to be discarded. With the initial bundles of trash in each hand, I slipped on a pair of sneakers and opened the front door for the first time in two months. The summer sun flooded the west-facing corridor; the afternoon light was a revelation. I rode the elevator down, passed by the guard's room, crossed the compound square—and felt, all the while, that I was witnessing something. The lived-in world. The day's weather. The humidity in the air and the pull of gravity.

Returning upstairs, I walked past the mounds of fabric and into the bathroom. I turned the hot water on and sat under the shower fully dressed. The tiles beneath my curled feet, the steam gradually making it hard to breathe, the cotton shirt growing heavy as it plastered against my back, the water sluicing down my forehead, and the hair, which by now covered my eyes to my chin, chest, stomach: I can feel each and every sensation still.

I walked out of the bathroom, peeled off my sodden outfit, rummaged around and put on what decent clothes I could find. I folded two 10,000-won notes into little squares, slipped them into my pocket, and went outside. I walked to a juk shop behind a nearby subway station and ordered what seemed the mildest item on their menu, a pine-nut juk. I took my time with the unduly hot bowl of rice porridge and, as I did, people walked past the window in bodies that looked fragile enough to shatter. Life was exceedingly vulnerable, I realized. The flesh, organs, bones, breaths passing before

my eyes all held within them the potential to snap, to cease—so easily, and by a single decision.

That is how death avoided me. Like an asteroid thought to be on a collision course avoids Earth by a hair's breadth, hurtling past at a furious velocity that knows neither regret nor hesitation.

I had not reconciled with life, but I had to resume living.

Close to two months of seclusion and near-starvation had left me with considerable muscle loss. To break the cycle of migraines, stomach spasms, and caffeine-rich painkillers, I needed to eat and move with regularity. But before I could attempt anything in earnest, the heatwave set in. On the first day the mercury climbed past our average body temperature, I turned on the air conditioner the previous tenant had left behind, only to discover it was broken. When my calls to various AC repair companies finally got through, I was invariably told that they were inundated with requests at the moment due to the extreme weather and the earliest anyone could pay a visit was in late August. Buying a new AC unit wasn't any easier.

The wise thing would have been to seek shelter in cool indoor spaces. But I couldn't face being around other people in cafés or libraries or banks. So I did what I could: lie plastered on the sitting-room floor and try to keep my body temperature down, take frequent cold-water showers to prevent heat exhaustion, and venture outside for some juk around eight o'clock when the swelter had dissipated somewhat. The shop's conditioned air was incredibly pleasant, while outside, past the windows that were as steamed up as on a winter's night, people surged forward, each clutching a portable fan aimed at their face as they headed home for the night. Filling the tropical-night streets whose heat, like eternity, wouldn't let up, and which in due time I would have to re-enter.

On one of those nights, I walked out of the shop and stopped at a crossing, where I felt a rush of hot air on my face from the still-warm asphalt. I had to resume my

letter, I thought. No, I had to start afresh. I would write a new note to replace the missive addressed to no one, the one I'd slipped into an envelope marked "Last Will" in permanent ink. I would start from scratch. I would change tack.

.....

But to write it, I first had to think.

When had everything begun to fall apart?

Where was the fork in the road?

Which rift and which break had been the tipping point?

There are people who brandish their sharpest weapon as they are taking their leave. We know this from experience. They do this so as to slice the tenderest part of the person they are leaving with the precision that proximity grants us.

.....

I don't want to live face down on the ground like you.

I'm leaving you so I can breathe.

I want to live, not be half-dead.

.....

I started having nightmares in the winter of 2012, after I began researching the book I went on to write. Initially these were dreams of outright violence. Running from airborne troops, being bludgeoned on the shoulder, falling to the ground. I can't recall the face of the uniformed man who kicked me in the flank as I lay sprawled on the

ground and turned me over with his boots. What I do remember is the shudder that ran through me when he grabbed his gun with both hands and pushed the bayonet into my chest.

Not wanting to cast a gloom over my family—my daughter, especially—I found a writing space a fifteen-minute walk away from home. The plan was to limit my writing to that place and to return to daily life the moment I left it. The room was on the first floor of a brick house that had been built in the 1980s and hadn't seen any repairs in three decades. I bought a tin of white water-based paint and daubed it over the heavily scratched metal door, then I hung a scarf above the room's window to obscure the crack in the old wooden frame. From nine in the morning until noon on the days when I had classes to teach, and until five o'clock on the days when I didn't, I went there to read materials I'd gathered or to make notes.

In the mornings and evenings, I continued to cook meals and sit down to eat with my family. I tried to have as many conversations as I could with my daughter, who had just started middle school and was encountering new situations at every turn. But I felt split in half. Even within those private moments, I could sense the shadow of the book lurking—when I turned on the gas ring and waited for the water in the pot to boil, or in the brief time it took to dredge tofu slices in egg wash and watch them crisp up on both sides.

The writing space was reached by a path running along a stream, and there was a section where the heavily tree-lined path sloped down before suddenly opening up. I had to walk across that exposed tract of land for about three hundred meters to reach the empty lot under the bridge that doubled as a roller rink. This distance seemed insurmountable, for while I skittered over it, I was entirely vulnerable and defenseless. I imagined snipers lying in wait on the rooftops flanking the single-lane road opposite, rifles aimed at the people below. I knew of course that this was nonsensical, that it was only my anxiety talking.

One night in late spring of 2013, as my insomnia worsened and my breathing became increasingly shallow—"Why must you breathe like that?" my daughter had complained to me one day—I was startled awake around one o'clock from a nightmare. Giving up on sleep altogether, I went outside to buy some water. There wasn't anyone about, not even a passing car, which made the traffic lights seem

redundant. But I stood and waited for the signal to turn green, my mind drifting as I gazed at the blazing twenty-four-hour convenience store on the other side of the two-lane road that led to the apartment complex. When I refocused, there was a line of about thirty men walking single file along the opposite sidewalk. Their hair was long, they were in reserve-forces uniform, and though each carried a shoulder rifle, they dawdled like tired children on a school excursion, their feet dragging and their postures slack and undisciplined.

When someone who hasn't slept soundly in a while, who is stumbling through a period of nightmares blurring with reality, chances across a scene that defies belief, they may well initially doubt themselves. Am I actually seeing this? Surely this must be part of my nightmare? And: How much can I trust my own senses?

The men were enveloped in a hushed silence, as though someone had hit the mute button on the scene unfolding before me. I remained still, following their backs with my eyes until the last one disappeared around the murky crossroads. It wasn't a dream. I wasn't the least bit drowsy and I hadn't been drinking. But neither could I quite believe what I'd seen. I told myself the men may be out on night training, as after all there was a reserve-forces training area in Naegok-dong, just past Umyeonsan. However, that would imply that the men had marched a dozen kilometers over the hill at this late hour and in the pitch dark. Whether this was commensurate training for a reserve troop, I didn't know. The next morning, I felt a strong urge to call any of my acquaintances who had done their mandatory service to ask if it was, but I also didn't want to be considered eccentric, as I felt I was being. To this day, I have not breathed a word of that night to anyone.

.....

Alongside women unknown to me, I climbed down the well, helping them to hold on to their children. We thought it would be safe down there, but without warning a shower of bullets rained down on us from above. The women clasped the children against their bodies, shielding them as best they could. From the bottom of what we'd thought was a dry well, a grassy liquid, viscous like melted rubber, oozed out and quickly rose around us. Engulfing our blood and our screams.

.....

I was walking along a deserted road with some companions whose faces I cannot recall. We came across a black passenger car parked on the shoulder, and someone said, He's in there. No name was mentioned, but we understood immediately that the one who had ordered the massacre that spring was in the car. As we stood watching, the car pulled away and turned onto the premises of a large stone building. Someone said, We should follow. We headed toward the building. There were several of us when we set out, but by the time we stepped inside the empty building, only two of us, including myself, remained. Someone stood quietly by my side. I sensed that the person was a man, and that he seemed to be following me reluctantly. We were only two—what could two people possibly do? Light leaked from a room at the end of the dim hall. When we stepped inside, the mass murderer was standing with his back to a wall. He held a lighted match in one hand. That's when I realized that my companion and I were each holding a match as well. We could speak for as long as the matches burned. No one had told us, but we knew that was the rule. The murderer's match was almost burned out, the flame down to his thumb. Our matches remained but were burning fast. Murderer, I thought I should say. I opened my mouth.

Murderer.

My voice refused to come out.

Murderer.

Louder, I had to speak louder.

What are you going to do about all the people you've killed? I said, using every last ounce of energy I had.

Then I wondered if we were supposed to kill him now, if this would be the last chance any of us had. But how? How could we possibly? I glanced to my side and saw the orange flame of my companion's frail matchstick—my companion of faint face and breath—wane. In that light I sensed with vivid clarity how young the keeper of that match was. He was only a gangling boy.

.....

I finished the manuscript and visited my publisher in January of the following year. I wanted to ask that they publish the book as quickly as possible. For I'd thought, foolishly, that once it was out, the nightmares would cease. My editor told me it would be better in terms of promotion to push the launch to May.

Wouldn't it be best to time the release so that one more person is likely to pick it up? they asked.

I was persuaded by those words. While I waited, I rewrote another chapter of the book. Then it was the editor's turn to rush me, until I at last handed in the final manuscript in April. The book came out almost to the day in mid May. The nightmares, unsurprisingly, continued regardless. In retrospect it baffles me. Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively—brazenly—hoped to soon shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces?

.....

Then there is the night I awoke from that black forest and covered my eyes with the palm of my cold hand.

Sometimes, with some dreams, you awake and sense that the dream is ongoing elsewhere. This dream is like that. As I eat my meals, drink my tea, ride the bus, walk hand in hand with my child, pack our bags ahead of a trip, or walk up the countless stairs out of a subway station, to one side of me it is perpetually snowing, over a plain I have never visited. Over black trees chopped down to torsos, dazzling hexagonal crystals form, then crumble. Startled, my feet underwater, I look back. And there it is: the sea, rushing in.

Unable to let go of this scene, which rose up repeatedly before my mind's eye, that autumn, I had a thought. I could find a suitable place and plant some logs there, as they had appeared in my dream. Planting them in the thousands might not be feasible, but ninety-nine—a number that opens to infinity—could work; and then, together with a dozen or so people of shared purpose, we could clothe the trees in black meek. Ink them with the same devotion with which one might swaddle them in gowns woven out of deep night, so that their sleep may remain eternally unbroken. And once it was all

done, we could wait. Not for the sea but for snow as white as cloth to drape down from the skies and blanket them all.

And the whole process could be documented in a short film, I suggested to a friend who had worked with photographs and on documentary features before. She readily agreed. We promised to see it through to fruition together but finding the right moment in both our schedules wasn't easy, and before long four years had drifted by.

.....

Then there is the heat-drenched night I walk back through the baked-asphalt air to an empty house and a cold shower. Every evening the people in the flats above and below and to either side of me turn on their ACs, and I am forced to seal shut my own doors and windows against the infernal air spewing out of their fans. I take a seat at my desk in what may as well be a steam room, before the lingering coolness of the shower evaporates. The envelope containing my will sits on the desk, still unaddressed. I pick it up and tear it to pieces.

Start again.

A spell that is always right, always correct.

I start again. Within five minutes, sweat is running down my skin. I take another cold shower; I return to the desk. I rip up the terrible note I wrote a moment ago.

Start again.

Write a proper letter of farewell, a true leave-taking.

The previous summer, as my private life began to crumble like a sugar cube dropped in water, back when the real partings that were to follow were only a premonition, I'd written a story titled "Farewell," a story about a woman of snow who melts away under sleet. But that can't be my actual, final farewell.

Whenever the sweat stung my eyes too much to continue, I returned to the shower. Back at the desk, I'd shred what I'd written. When I eventually laid my clammy body on the floor, with yet another letter I had to begin anew remaining, the day was breaking blue. Like a blessing, I felt the temperature drop by a fraction. I thought I

might be able to get some rest at last and was in fact half asleep, when the snow began drifting over the plain. A snow that seemed to have been falling for decades—no, centuries.

.....

They're still safe.

That is what I told myself as I stared in defiance at the snowy field, refusing to turn away from the awareness that gripped me like a heavy, suspended blade.

The trees planted along the ridge to the top of the hill were safe, being outside the reach of the flood tide. The graves behind the copse were also safe, as the sea couldn't rise that high. The white bones of the hundreds buried there remained cool, clean, and dry. The waves couldn't steal them away. Black trees stood their ground under falling snow, their bases neither wet nor rotting. A snow that had been falling for decades—no, centuries.

That's when I knew.

That I had to go, that I had to turn my back on the bones lower down, which were already lost to the billows. I had to head to the crest, before it was too late, parting the livid water that was now up to my knees. Waiting for no one, trusting no help would come, without hesitation, all the way up the brow. Up where I could see white snow crystals breaking over the woods.

There was no time.

It was the only way, that is

if I wanted to go on.

Go on living.