



Walking into Memory: Wounding Love and the Transfusion of Life from the Dead

We Do Not Part. By HAN Kang. Translated by E. Yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris. New York: Hogarth, 2025. 272 pages. ISBN 9780593595459.

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Is it possible to grieve for lives that we did not know, or care enough about? What if that grieving involves unceasing and piercing pain? Why would one carry out the grave task of piecing together the fragments of the unfamiliar dead, or grapple with carnage and trauma that history—mostly written by the victors—has refused to reckon with? Because *we do not part*, Han Kang would respond. That answer is the English title of her 2021 novel, recently translated by e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris. A synthesis of the 2024 Nobel laureate's oeuvre, this latest work welds incisive prose and gendered insight to cut through historical sediments in divided Korea. It exposes the bleak cruelty of humans with the warm flash of love.

The modern barbarity that Han Kang confronts here was perpetrated against the people of Jeju Island from 1947 to 1954, an extreme event that still remains without a rightful name (*jeongmyeong* 正名). It is referred to as “4.3” (*sa sam*, or April 3rd), marking an armed uprising led by local communists on that day in 1948 against oppression by police and right-wing youths and in opposition to the upcoming election to establish a separate government in the US-occupied southern half of the nation, three years after Korea's liberation from Japanese colonization. A hushed prelude—and an echoing coda—to the active international conflict known as the Korean War (1950–1953), “4.3” also denotes the massacre by the anticommunist

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state and paramilitary forces of some thirty thousand islanders labeled communist sympathizers, or Reds (*ppalgaengi*). Shackled by fear of *guilt-by-association*, the surviving families concealed their losses, unable to mourn publicly through the decades of authoritarian rule.

We Do Not Part compels us to take a grueling journey into the wreckage of 4.3, like “a snail coming out of its shell to push along a knife’s edge” (p. 6). The narrative’s painful, deliberate movement embodies more than an artist’s delicate approach to long ungrieved, perhaps ungrievable, lives eliminated as sub- or non-human. It also foregrounds fragile bodies, mostly women and the elderly, as it daringly tackles the nation’s fractured history. Built upon Japanese colonial infrastructure, entrenched through Cold War development, and operating within global capitalism, the peninsula’s so-called division system renders it untenable for contemporary beneficiaries to claim innocence regarding its perpetuation.

Han Kang is certainly not the first to pick at the nation’s wound. South Korea maintains a robust cultural tradition of countering erasure and distortion by registering, transmitting, and inheriting traumatic experiences and responses to social injustices. Authors who lived through the tumultuous mid-20th century penned a voluminous canon of division literature. Accounts of 4.3 have surfaced more widely, and in heterogeneous forms, since the 2000s; some are referenced at the end of the Korean original, *Jakbyeol haji anneunda* (2021). Han’s novel superlatively reconfigures this legacy as her experimental aesthetics sutures across conventional boundaries of local/national/transnational, colonial/Cold War/post-Cold War, and evidentiary/allegorical/affective. Its disjointed temporality subtly interlaces multiple zones of devastation in 20th-century Asia—not only Gwangju and Jeju, but also Okinawa and Taiwan, Manchuria and Vietnam—suggesting that they are not isolated instances of *collateral damage* but part of imperialism’s morphing continuum.

On the surface, *We Do Not Part* tracks the novelist-narrator Kyungha’s emergency expedition to upland Jeju to save the pet bird of her friend Inseon, a documentarian-turned-carpenter hospitalized in Seoul after an accident. Unfolding against a desolate landscape in a snowstorm, this surreal

quest feels at once visionary and tangible, visceral and spectral, intimate and historical. The first of the novel's three parts opens with Kyungha's dream, in which thousands of black tree trunks that resemble people hunkering down in the snow are eventually inundated by the sea. This nightmare of engulfing has plagued her since she wrote a book about a massacre in "G—" (Though it is not explicitly stated, readers can readily infer a reference to the brutal suppression in 1980 of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement. An author's note in the original edition states that Han Kang composed the first two pages of *We Do Not Part* in June 2014, a month after publishing *Human Acts* [*Sonyeon-i onda*], which addresses Gwangju and its aftermath.) Seeping into her waking life, the images make her doubt her own sense of reality. Estranged from her family, she struggles through heatwaves, migraines, and stomach cramps to complete her will. When she receives Inseon's message in December, four years have slipped by since they spoke about collaborating to film the incomprehensible dreamscape. Two mornings ago, Inseon says, she sliced two fingers while sawing a log for their "dream project" in her workshop, which is attached to the cottage left her by her mother, Jeongsim. Having outlived the rest of her immediate family, all sacrificed during 4.3 except for her older sister, Jeongsim had faded into dementia and died four years earlier.

Paradoxically, the two contemporary women, each hovering on the brink of death, propel each other into another life. Through this caring web of impaired lives, including nonhuman and disappeared ones, the space of witnessing and remembering in *We Do Not Part* expands beyond biological, generational, and cultural affinities. Han Kang builds an expansive and immersive space visually, tactilely, and lyrically. Treading as lightly as the white-feathered Ama, her prose gathers testimonies like accumulating snowflakes—each distinctively crystalized yet ultimately interlinked. The first of Inseon's triptych of documentary films presents Vietnamese women speaking about wartime assaults by Korean soldiers. The second captures the silence of an elderly woman with dementia who as a factory worker in Pyongyang joined the armed independence struggle in Manchuria, alongside an interview with her daughter-caregiver. The third focuses on

Inseon's recollections of her father, a 4.3 victim who, after fifteen years in prison, lived with the aftereffects of torture in a split world.

Memories of these strangers uncannily accompany Kyungha's blizzard-bound journey to Inseon's secluded home. Foreshadowing a fuller revelation of 4.3 upon her arrival, recurring metaphors of snowfall and the imperiled body bind the diegetic present to the layered past—"as if there were a causal link" (p. 64). Compound images of white and red, telluric and corporeal, summon readers to those unbearable yet inescapable sites of bloodshed. Snow haunts the living with wounds that refuse to scab over, like Inseon's sutured fingers, which need to be pricked every three minutes for three weeks and whose amputation would leave her with incurable phantom pain. And because Kyungha cannot turn her *nun* ('eye' in Korean) away from the excruciating sight, she has to step into the *nun* ('snow') covering the field of slaughter on the volcanic island.

The whiteout in Jeju brings Kyungha back to the snowy night in Seoul when she and Inseon, occasional co-workers, became friends. Inseon confessed to running away, at seventeen, from a ghost-like Jeongsim. Waking up in a Seoul hospital after a plunge from an icy embankment, the daughter discovered the source of her mother's nightmares—why she'd been sleeping with a coping saw tucked beneath her cotton futon. Snowfall dragged Jeongsim back to the primal horror of 4.3, when she, a thirteen-year-old, stared as her slightly older sister brushed away the white drifts covering bodies in a barley field, exposing the frozen faces of their parents and sibling. As Inseon put it, "*She [Jeongsim's sister] didn't want her little sister touching dead people. But something about the words 'get a good look at them' so terrified my mom that all she could do was grab her sister's sleeve, shut her eyes tight, and cling to her as they walked*" (p. 63; italics in the original).

We Do Not Part vividly illustrates how this cycle of remembering through looking at (or away), trembling in silence, grabbing in the dark, faltering, starting afresh, reliving nightmares, recounting, listening, and feeling others' pain across distances can transcend kinship, chronology, and territory. The multisensory memory of seeing dead flesh, hearing whispers, and clutching limbs migrates across generations and media, from

the aging survivors to their caring descendants, from Inseon's filmic frames to Kyungha's literary lines. Dissolving the boundaries between dream and reality, the mnemonic flow ripples like the lullaby in dialect sung by Inseon and hummed by her budgie, or the droplets that drenched Manchuria's plain, Jeju's sands, Vietnam's jungles, Gwangju's roads, and Seoul's riversides. The numbness of Kyungha's feet in the snow of the mountain village evokes the sensation of the woman from Pyongyang who miraculously dodged Japanese bullets at the cost of four toes lost to frostbite. The visitor from the mainland also recalls Jeongsim's quiet voice and warm hand, whose soft but forceful grip is reaffirmed in Inseon's reminiscence. That night in Seoul when the mother spoke for the first time of the snow on the faces she never forgot, the daughter sensed a fervor pulsing from her body, even as she shivered as if the cold had crept into her bones.

It is this flame of the Other—who willingly lends their body, even if it is bleeding, dying, or decaying—that lights our path to the truthful picture of 4.3: the annihilation of humans labeled as "Reds." After burying the stiffened Ama with an inexplicable grief, Kyungha, feverish, collapses in the hollow of the house. Having helped to rebuild it from the scorched bones of 1948, the inheritor Jeongsim hoarded there every record of her elder brother, one of the islanders dragged off to a mainland prison. Uncertain if she is conscious or dreaming, alive or dead, Kyungha is reunited with Inseon in that private archive. Whether spirits, shadows, or doubles, they go through grainy photographs, letters, and yellowed press clippings, allowing the reader to see, hear, and touch the harrowing chapters of Korea's unending war. Despite the fall of the authoritarian regime, the massacre sites have not yet been fully excavated, nor have the memories of the countless victims. Jeongsim never recovered a single bone of her brother from the Gyeongsan cobalt mine, where thousands of civilians accused of being communists were shot and dumped in the months following the outbreak of the Korean War.

Beginning with the question "*Do you feel that?*" (p. 237), the brief last part of *We Do Not Part* beckons us to walk into the dark abyss of history. Guided by the flickering candle of a woman who exists both here and there, we come to grasp that although the living could not save those who died in

the past, the unforgotten dead can illuminate our present lives, to reuse an expression from Han Kang's Nobel Prize lecture. When the youngest girl in Jeongsim's family was found with her jaw shattered and her stomach torn open by bullets, Jeongsim bit her own finger and let her blood flow into her little sister's mouth. No wonder that when the teenage Inseon was injured in Seoul, her mother welcomed her spirit in Jeju with a bowl of soothing porridge, just as Inseon herself would later offer the same comfort to her friend, warming their wounded bodies. At the edge of her life, the surviving sister would crawl into her daughter's room and slip a finger into her mouth or grip her wrist, begging, "Save me." Inseon, the sole caregiver, felt them burning together like a pot of porridge.

After her mother passed away, Inseon no longer needed to hide under the table with her but still couldn't sleep or leave the island. Suddenly recalling the "dream project" with Kyungha, she went to the site of her father's childhood home, a burial ground since 4.3. Retracing her mother's footsteps, she investigated the mass killings in Jeju, Daegu, and Gyeongsan through oral testimonies, declassified US Army records, and other evidence. Far from finding the strength to initiate the collaborative project, the deeper she probed, the more devastated she became. One night in October, a gust of wind through the woods carried to her the presence of the children exterminated decades ago: "*It was like I had thousands of transparent needles placed all over my body and they were transfusing me with life*" (p. 250).

It is this profound love accompanied by a "terrible agony" (p. 244) that summons us to properly remember 4.3, together with other sites of human violence, and enables us to cling to the possibility of human dignity.

Translating Han Kang's novels is a daunting task. Her genre-defying prose is labyrinthine, especially in *We Do Not Part*, thick with historical intertextuality and local dialects that challenge the hegemony of the standard language. The English translation, starting with an inviting title that inserts a collective "we" not present in the source text, achieves remarkable fluency despite these obstacles. The exclusion of the author's note and references that appear in the original version is a missed opportunity, however, because these elements provide nuanced literary insight and assert the novel's

historical rigor. While additional paratexts—such as a glossary of Korean terms and an introduction—would aid comprehension, this translation creates a memorable experience that will steer Anglophone readers into deeper engagement with Korean texts and contexts as essential threads in the fabric of the human story.