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GREEK LESSONS

Han Kang

TRANSLATED BY
DEBORAH SMITH AND E. YAEWON



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I

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 ageing Borges and the world, then what was it?

Though I'd travelled to Switzerland, I didn't visit Geneva. I had no strong desire to see his grave first-hand. 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

I

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.

2

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 towards 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 sombre 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 colour 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-coloured 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 on 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 ㄴ sound as pronounced in the word ㄴㅏ, na, and when pronounced in ㄴㅣ, ni; after that, she realized ㅏ sounded different in ㅏㅏ, sa, than it did in ㅏㅣ, si. 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 ㅣ, i, combined with ㅡ, 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 ㅁ. On the page, this single-syllable word resembled an old pagoda: ㅁ, the foundation, ㅂ, the main body, ㅅ, the upper section. She liked the feeling when she pronounced it: ㅅ – ㅂ – ㅁ, 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: ㅁ. ㅁ. *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 school-girls, 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 she was in secondary school. Her gaze had lifted blankly to the blackboard as usual, but there it had snagged on