'A grim but heartfelt performance, touching on the possibility of forgiveness and the survival of the spirit' *Sunday Times*

'A conversation of which we rarely hear both sides: the living talking to the dead, and the dead speaking back' *Sunday Telegraph*

'In simple, lyrical and visceral prose . . . Han presents a vivid account of both the power of collective spirit . . . and the capacity of brutal regimes to crush it to nothing' *Literary Review*

'In *Human Acts* [Han] has created a moving testament to fiction's capacity to house even the most liminal and oppressed, to give voice to the voiceless, whether living or dead' Kate Webb, *Times Literary Supplement*

Human Acts

A Novel

Han Kang

Translated from the Korean and introduced by Deborah Smith

GRANTA

I

The Boy. 1980

'Looks like rain,' you mutter to yourself.

What'll we do if it really chucks it down?

You open your eyes so that only a slender crack of light seeps in, and peer at the gingko trees in front of the Provincial Office. As though there, between those branches, the wind is about to take on visible form. As though the raindrops suspended in the air, held breath before the plunge, are on the cusp of trembling down, glittering like jewels.

When you open your eyes properly, the trees' outlines dim and blur. You're going to need glasses before long. This thought gets briefly disturbed by the whooping and applause which breaks out from the direction of the fountain. Perhaps your sight's as bad now as it's going to get, and you'll be able to get away without glasses after all?

'Listen to me if you know what's good for you: come back home, right this minute.'

You shake your head, trying to rid yourself of the memory, the anger lacing your brother's voice. From the speakers in front of the fountain comes the clear, crisp voice of the young woman holding the microphone. You can't see the fountain from where you're sitting, on the steps leading

up to the municipal gymnasium. You'd have to go around to the right of the building if you wanted to have even a distant view of the memorial service. Instead, you resolve to stay where you are, and simply listen.

'Brothers and sisters, our loved ones are being brought here today from the Red Cross hospital.'

The woman then leads the crowd gathered in the square in a chorus of the national anthem. Her voice is soon lost in the multitude, thousands of voices piling up on top of each other, a soaring tower of sound rearing up into the sky. The melody surges up to a peak, only to swing down again like a pendulum. The low murmur of your own voice is barely audible.

This morning, when you asked how many dead were being transferred from the Red Cross hospital today, Jin-su's reply was no more elaborate than it needed to be: thirty. While the leaden mass of the anthem's refrain rises and falls, rises and falls, thirty coffins will be lifted down from the truck, one by one. They will be placed in a row next to the twenty-eight that you and Jin-su laid out this morning, the line stretching all the way from the gym to the fountain. Before yesterday evening, twenty-six of the eighty-three coffins hadn't yet been brought out for a group memorial service; yesterday evening this number had grown to twenty-eight, when two families had appeared and each identified a corpse. These were then placed in coffins, with a necessarily hasty and improvised version of the usual rites. After making a note of their names and coffin numbers in your ledger, you added 'group memorial service' in parentheses; Jin-su had asked you to make a clear record of which coffins had already

gone through the service, to prevent the same ones being brought out twice. You'd wanted to go and watch, just this one time, but he told you to stay at the gym.

'Someone might come looking for a relative while the service is going on. We need someone manning the doors.'

The others you've been working with, all of them older than you, have gone to the service. Black ribbons pinned to the left-hand side of their chests, the bereaved who have kept vigil for several nights in front of the coffins now follow them in a slow, stiff procession, moving like scarecrows stuffed with sand or rags. Eun-sook had been hanging back, and when you told her, 'It's okay, go with them', her laughter revealed a snaggle-tooth. Whenever an awkward situation forced a nervous laugh from her, that tooth couldn't help but make her look somewhat mischievous.

'I'll just watch the beginning, then, and come right back.'

Left on your own, you sit down on the steps which lead up to the gym, resting the ledger, an improvised thing whose cover is a piece of black strawboard bent down the middle, on your knee. The chill from the concrete steps leaches through your thin tracksuit bottoms. Your PE jacket is buttoned up to the top, and you keep your arms firmly folded across your chest.

Hibiscus and three thousand ri *full of splendid mountains and rivers . . .*

You stop singing along with the anthem. That phrase 'splendid mountains and rivers' makes you think of the

second character in 'splendid', '*ryeo*', one of the ones you studied in your Chinese script lessons. It's got an unusually high stroke count; you doubt you could remember how to write it now. Does it mean 'mountains and rivers where the flowers are splendid', or 'mountains and rivers that are splendid as flowers'? In your mind, the image of the written character becomes overlaid with that of hollyhocks, the kind that grow in your parents' yard, shooting up taller than you in summer. Long, stiff stems, their blossoms unfurling like little scraps of white cloth. You close your eyes to help you picture them more clearly. When you let your eyelids part just the tiniest fraction, the gingko trees in front of the Provincial Office are shaking in the wind. So far, not a single drop of rain has fallen.

The anthem is over, but there seems to be some delay with the coffins. Perhaps there are just too many. The sound of wailing sobs is faintly audible amid the general commotion. The woman holding the microphone suggests they all sing '*Arirang*' while they wait for the coffins to be got ready.

You who abandoned me here
Your feet will pain you before you've gone even ten ri . . .

When the song subsides, the woman says, 'Let us now hold a minute's silence for the deceased.' The hubbub of a crowd of thousands dies down as instantaneously as if someone had pressed a mute button, and the silence it leaves in its wake seems shockingly stark. You get to your feet to

observe the minute's silence, then walk up the steps to the main doors, one half of which has been left open. You get your surgical mask out from your trouser pocket and put it on.

These candles are no use at all.

You step into the gym hall, fighting down the wave of nausea that hits you with the stench. It's the middle of the day, but the dim interior is more like evening's dusky half-light. The coffins that have already been through the memorial service have been grouped neatly near the door, while at the foot of the large window, each covered with a white cloth, lie the bodies of thirty-two people for whom no relatives have yet arrived to put them in their coffins. Next to each of their heads, a candle wedged into an empty drinks bottle flickers quietly.

You walk further into the auditorium, towards the row of seven corpses which have been laid out to one side. Whereas the others have their cloths pulled up only to their throats, almost as though they are sleeping, these are all fully covered. Their faces are revealed only occasionally, when someone comes looking for a young girl or a baby. The sight of them is too cruel to be inflicted otherwise.

Even among these, there are differing degrees of horror, the worst being the corpse in the very furthest corner. When you first saw her, she was still recognisably a smallish woman in her late teens or early twenties; now, her decomposing body has bloated to the size of a grown man. Every time you pull back the cloth for someone who has come to find a daughter or younger sister, the sheer rate of decomposition stuns you. Stab wounds slash down from her forehead to her

left eye, her cheekbone to her jaw, her left breast to her armpit, gaping gashes where the raw flesh shows through. The right side of her skull has completely caved in, seemingly the work of a club, and the meat of her brain is visible. These open wounds were the first to rot, followed by the many bruises on her battered corpse. Her toes, with their clear pedicure, were initially intact, with no external injuries, but as time passed they swelled up like thick tubers of ginger, turning black in the process. The pleated skirt with its pattern of water droplets, which used to come down to her shins, doesn't even cover her swollen knees now.

You come back to the table by the door to get some new candles from the box, then return to the body in the corner. You light the cloth wicks of the new candle from the melted stub guttering by the corpse. Once the flame catches, you blow the dying candle out and remove it from the glass bottle, then insert the new one in its place, careful not to burn yourself.

Your fingers clutching the still-warm candle stub, you bend down. Fighting the putrid stink, you look deep into the heart of the new flame. Its translucent edges flicker in constant motion, supposedly burning up the smell of death which hangs like a pall in the room. There's something bewitching about the bright orange glow at its heart, its heat evident to the eye. Narrowing your gaze even further, you centre in on the tiny blue-tinged core that clasps the wick, its trembling shape recalling that of a heart, or perhaps an apple seed.

You straighten up, unable to stand the smell any longer. Looking around the dim interior, you drag your gaze lingeringly past each candle as it wavers by the side of a corpse, the pupils of quiet eyes.

Suddenly it occurs to you to wonder: when the body dies, what happens to the soul? How long does it linger by the side of its former home?

You give the room a thorough once-over, making sure there are no other candles that need to be changed, and walk towards the door.

When a living person looks at a dead person, mightn't the person's soul also be there by its body's side, looking down at its own face?

Just before you step outside, you turn and look back over your shoulder. There are no souls here. There are only silenced corpses, and that horrific putrid stink.

At first, the bodies had been housed not in the gymnasium, but in the corridor of the complaints department in the Provincial Office. There were two women, both a few years older than you, one wearing a wide-collared school uniform and the other in ordinary clothes. You stared blankly, forgetting for a moment why you'd come, as they wiped the bloodied faces with a damp cloth, and struggled to straighten the stiff arms, to force them down by the corpses' sides.

'Can I help you?' the woman in school uniform asked, pulling her mask down below her mouth as she turned to face you. Her round eyes were her best feature, though ever-so-slightly protruding, and her hair was divided into two braids, from which a mass of short, frizzy hairs were escaping. Damp with sweat, her hair was plastered to her forehead and temples.

'I'm looking for a friend,' you said, holding out the hand which you'd been using to cover your nose, unused to the stench of blood.

'Did you arrange to meet here?'

'No, he's one of those . . .'

'I see. You can come and have a look, if you like.'

You systematically examined the faces and bodies of the twenty-odd people lying against the corridor wall. You had to look closely if you wanted to be sure; your eyes soon started to feel the strain, and you had to keep blinking to try and refocus.

'Not here?' the other woman asked, straightening up. She had the sleeves of her pale green shirt rolled up to the elbows. You'd assumed she was a similar age to the young woman in school uniform; seeing her without the mask on, though, you could see she was older, more like twenty. Her skin was somewhat sallow, and she had a slender, delicate neck. Only the look in her eyes was tough and vigorous. And there was nothing feeble about her voice.

'No.'

'Have you tried the mortuary at Jeonnam, and the one at the Red Cross hospital?'

'Yes.'

'What about this friend's parents?'

'His mother passed away, and his father works in Daejeon; he lives in our annex with his older sister.'

'They still won't put long-distance calls through?'

'No, and I've tried a few times.'

'Well, what about your friend's sister?'

'She hasn't been home since Sunday; I came here to look for her too. One of our neighbours said they saw my friend get hit yesterday, when the soldiers were shooting.'

'Mightn't he just have been wounded and admitted to hospital?' the woman in school uniform interjected, without looking up.

You shook your head.

'In that case he would have found a way to call us. He'd know we were worrying about him.'

'Come by again tomorrow, and the next couple of days,' said the woman in the pale green shirt. 'Apparently all the dead will be brought here from now on. They say there's no room left in the morgues.'

The woman in school uniform wiped the face of a young man whose throat had been sliced open by a bayonet, his red uvula poking out. She brushed the palm of her hand down over his staring eyes, closing them, rinsed the cloth in a bucket of water and wrung it out viciously. The water that came out was dark with blood, splattering outside the bucket. The woman in the green shirt stood up.

'How about you give us a hand, if you have time?' she asked. 'Just for today. We don't have enough people. It's not difficult . . . you just need to cut up that cloth over there and use it to cover the bodies. And when someone comes looking for a friend, like you did, you uncover them again. The faces are badly injured, so they'll need to get a good look at their bodies and clothes to decide whether it's who they think it is.'

From that day on, you became one of the team. Eun-sook, as you'd guessed, was in her final year of high school. Seon-ju,

the woman in the green shirt, was a machinist at a dressmaker's on the main shopping street; she'd been left in the lurch when the boss had decided that he and his son, who'd been studying at one of the universities here, should go and stay with a relative outside the city. Both Eun-sook and Seon-ju had gone to give blood at Jeonnam University Hospital after hearing a street broadcast saying that people were dying of blood loss. There, hearing that the Provincial Office, now being run by civilians, was short of hands, and in the confusion of the moment, they'd taken on the task of dealing with the corpses.

In the classroom, where seats were assigned in order of height, you were always the one at the very front – in other words, the shortest. Since March, when you'd started your third year at middle school, you'd finally hit puberty, resulting in a slightly lower voice and a fair-to-middling growth spurt, but you still looked younger than your age. Jin-su's work mostly kept him confined to the briefing room; the first time he saw you, he looked surprised.

'You're a first-year, aren't you? This is no place for you.' Jin-su's deeply lidded eyes and long lashes were almost feminine; the university in Seoul he was attending was temporarily closed, so he'd come down to Gwangju.

'No,' you told him, 'I'm a third-year. And I don't have a problem with the work here.'

This wasn't bravado; there was nothing technically difficult about the tasks you'd been assigned. Seon-ju and Eun-sook had already done most of the heavy work, which involved covering plywood or Styrofoam boards with plastic, then lifting the corpses on top of these boards. They also

washed the necks and faces with a cloth, ran a comb through the matted hair to tidy it a bit, then wrapped the bodies in plastic in an effort to combat the smell. In the meantime, you made a note in your ledger of gender, approximate age, what clothes they were wearing and what brand of shoes, and assigned each corpse a number. You then wrote the same number on a scrap of paper, pinned it to the corpse's chest, and covered them up to the neck with one of the white cloths. Eun-sook and Seon-ju would then help you pull them over to the wall. Jin-su, who seemed to be permanently rushed off his feet, would come striding up to you several times a day, wanting to transfer the information you'd recorded in your ledger onto posters, to put up at the main entrance to the building. A lot of the people who came looking for someone had either seen those posters themselves or been told about them by someone else. In cases of a positive identification, you would retreat to a respectful distance to wait for the sobbing and wailing to pass. As the corpses had only been given a cursory treatment, it was left to the bereaved to stop their noses and ears with cotton wool and give them a fresh change of clothing. Once they had been thus simply dressed and placed into a coffin, it was your job to oversee the transfer to the gym, and make a note of everything in your ledger.

The one stage in the process that you couldn't quite get your head around was the singing of the national anthem, which took place at a brief, informal memorial service for the bereaved families, after their dead had been formally placed in the coffins. It was also strange to see the Taegukgi, the national flag, being spread over each coffin and tied