

LEBRIS

We know
books

Also by Han Kang

The Vegetarian

Human Acts

HAN KANG
THE WHITE BOOK

TRANSLATED FROM THE KOREAN
BY DEBORAH SMITH

GRANTA

In the spring, when I decided to write about white things, the first thing I did was to make a list.

Swaddling bands

Newborn gown

Salt

Snow

Ice

Moon

Rice

Waves

Yulan

White bird

'Laughing whitely'

Blank paper

White dog

White hair

Shroud

With each item I wrote down, a ripple of agitation ran through me. I felt that yes, I needed to write this

book, and that the process of writing it would be transformative, would itself transform, into something like white ointment applied to a swelling, like gauze laid over a wound. Something I needed.

But then, a few days later, running my eyes over that list again, I wondered what meaning might lie in this task, in peering into the heart of these words.

If I sift those words through myself, sentences will shiver out, like the strange, sad shriek the bow draws from a metal string. Could I let myself hide between these sentences, veiled with white gauze?

This was difficult to answer, so I left the list as it was and put off anything more. I came abroad in August, to this country I'd never visited before, got a short-term lease on a flat in its capital, and learned to draw out my days in these strange environs. One night almost two months later, when the season's chill was just beginning to bite, a migraine set in, viciously familiar. I washed down some pills with warm water, and realised (quite calmly) that hiding would be impossible.

Now and then, the passage of time seems acutely apparent. Physical pain always sharpens the awareness. The migraines that began when I was twelve or thirteen swoop down without warning, bringing with them agonising stomach cramps that stop daily life in its

tracks. Even the smallest task is left suspended as I concentrate on simply enduring the pain, sensing time's discrete drops as razor-sharp gemstones, grazing my fingertips. One deep breath drawn in, and this new moment of life takes shape distinct as a bead of blood. Even once I have stepped back into the flow, one day melding seamlessly into another, that sensation remains ever there in that spot, waiting, breath held.

Each moment is a leap forwards from the brink of an invisible cliff, where time's keen edges are constantly renewed. We lift our foot from the solid ground of all our life lived thus far, and take that perilous step out into the empty air. Not because we can claim any particular courage, but because there is no other way. Now, in this moment, I feel that vertiginous thrill course through me. As I step recklessly into time I have not yet lived, into this book I have not yet written.

Door

This was something that happened a long time ago.

Before signing the contract for the lease, I went to look at the flat again.

Its metal door had once been white, but that brightness had faded over time. It was a mess when I saw it, paint flaking off in patches to reveal the rust beneath. And if that had been all, I would have remembered it as nothing more than a scruffy old door. But there was also the way its number, 301, had been inscribed.

Someone – perhaps another in a long line of temporary occupants – had used some sharp implement, maybe a drill bit, to scratch the number into the door's surface. I could make out each individual stroke. 3, itself three hand spans high. 0, smaller, yet gone over several times, a fierce scrawl that attracted attention. Finally, 1, a long, deep-gouged line, taut with the effort of its making. Along this collection of straight and curved wounds rust had spread, a vestige of violence, like long-dried bloodstains,

hardened, reddish-black. *I hold nothing dear. Not the place where I live, not the door I pass through every day, not even, damn it, my life.* Those numbers were glaring at me, clenching their teeth tight shut.

That was the flat I wanted that winter, the flat where I'd chosen to spin out my days.

As soon as I'd unpacked, I bought a tin of white paint and a good-sized paintbrush. Neither the kitchen nor the bedroom had been repapered, and their walls were spotted with stains large and small. These dark splotches were especially conspicuous around any electrical switches. I wore pale-grey tracksuit bottoms and an old white sweater, so the splatters wouldn't show up too badly. Even before I'd started to paint, I was unconcerned with achieving a neat, even finish. It would be enough, I reasoned, just to paint over the stains – *surely white splotches are better than dirty ones?* I swept my brush over the large patches on the ceiling where the rain must have seeped through at one time, watching grey disappear beneath white. I gave the sink's grubby bowl a wipe with a flannel before painting it that same bright white, never mind that its pedestal was brown.

Finally, I stepped out into the corridor to paint the front door. With each swish of the brush over the scar-laced surface, its imperfections were erased. Those

deep-gouged numbers disappeared, those rusted bloodstains vanished. I went back inside the flat to take a break and get warm, and when I came back out an hour later I saw the paint had run. It looked untidy, probably because I was using a brush rather than a roller. After painting an extra coat over the top so the streaks were less visible, I went back inside to wait. Another hour went by before I shuffled out in my slippers. Snow had begun to scatter down. Outside, the alley had darkened; the street lights were not yet on. Paint tin in one hand, brush in the other, I stood unmoving, a dumb witness to the snowflakes' slow descent, like hundreds of feathers feathering down.

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