

JOSEPH HAN

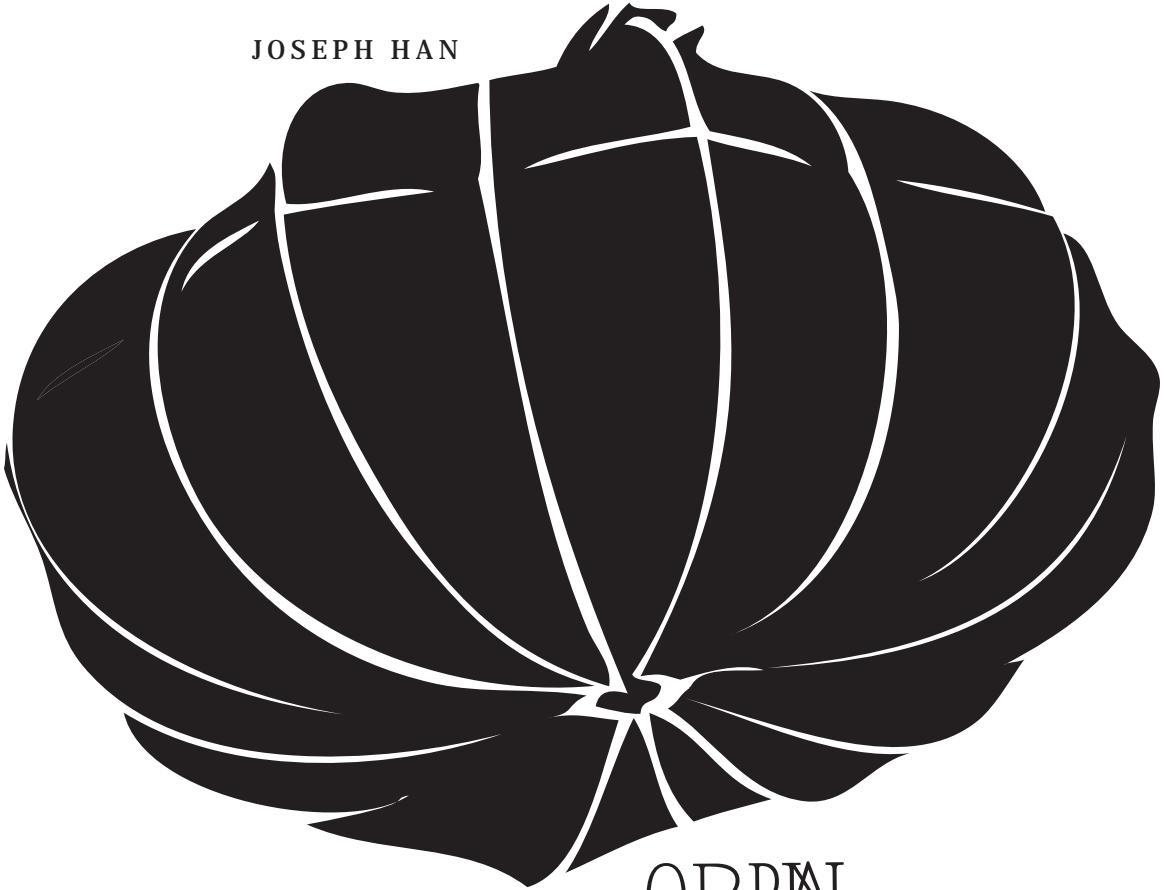


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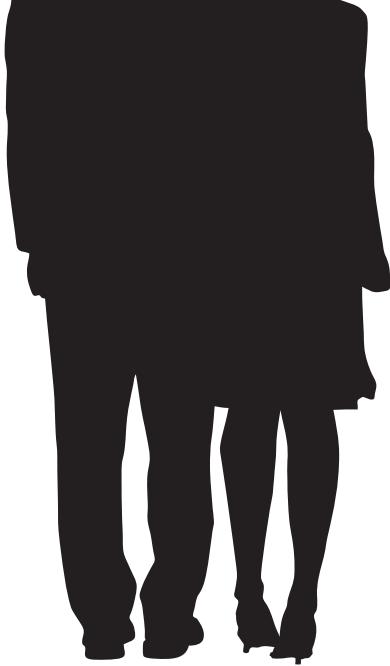
TINFISH

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THE PUBLICATION OF EXPERIMENTAL POETRY FROM THE PACIFIC.

JOSEPH HAN



ORPAIN



Joseph Han was born in Seoul, Korea and raised in Honolulu, Hawai'i. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, where he won the 2015 Academy of American Poets Prize.

ORPHAN

by Joseph Han
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ORPHAN

They ask you to translate
the plaque hanging

in the hallway, those Korean
characters shelled

behind glass. Tap on the surface
to wake them.

You get as far as the first line,
My start is – you can't

finish. How do you explain
to friends that silence

is a sorry charade
of the universe,

something grand in that way
making language

a galaxy because it seems
just as far.

Your secret: although
it's strangled inside

the lantern, a remnant
flicker in your chest, at least

it can be asked of light.
There's a reason why

burn sounds like born.
You read the glow –

what is a sentence
but a dark room.

Remember, there was
a beginning. Like some faulty

power, now it's like claiming
to be invisible but only

if people turn their backs
on you. Call this distress,

a flare in a burnt down city:
at least a part of you survived.

Before English: the first time
you said *mother, father,*

your own name. Each time
you speak, it is a calling

into crowds to make them
turn around and pick you up.

CHILD ASKS GOD FOR A MAKEUP STARTER KIT

for Julie Han

and calls him a culprit. He calls
on the birds, and they scratch Christ's
red-lettered words into her arm. Referral
to cast aside worry (Only pagans have
such little faith). Exfoliate. She washes
her face with salt water and sand.
Scrubs every blemish until pus retreats
from the mount. Acne loses turf war.
She blends sugar with dirt to match
her skin tone. Grinds mechanical pencil
lead for eye shadow, smearing half-moons
under brow. Brush tip marker eclipsed
over lids. Her look gets big. She heats
a spoon over stove, applies blush against
cheek. Burning pink or peach. Aims
a peeler against her lips. Hungers
to sculpt candy apple red. A final touch
of gloss dripping gems. Eve's kiss
meets fruit: the first time she knew
that all she had were leaves.



PLASTIC BRIDGE

Mother travelled to Seoul for Botox to erase
unwanted lines, paralyze muscles and waitress wrinkles,
created new incisions on her eyelids because
tape takes forever. The Economist says 16 in 1,000
Koreans undergo plastic surgery, regardless
of procedure. Count me in, or may I need
to demand half-price since my left-eyelid is already creased?
Precisely, saving my funds will cut it
if I use an X-acto.

Grandmother travelled to Seoul, telling me she wanted
to visit homeland before she dies.
She came back with a ghost pulling at skin,
and she smiled but even that could not
be stretched – satisfaction masked. Father travelled to Seoul
for dental reasons but came back with bruises
under his eyes to remove the bags he carried in his cab.
He could also smile, fixed his teeth too, now wearing
crowns of youth.

When I travelled to Seoul, for the second time in my life,
my father asked me if I wanted to fix
my nose to look like a “talent”: *you could
find a beautiful Korean wife here
and teach English.* Rhinoplasty is popular among early adults
who want to look more Western.
*Connect with what’s happening to us here. How we’re fearful
and wonderful once we’re made
better.* Between us,

I saw the old photos I would soon uncover
of my parents when they were younger,
the forty-five thousand
miles I would need
to cross. This bridge
on my face
that I had to connect
us would not
be enough.

WORDS

I knew enough
enough to say

I'll be back from school

Not without attending Korean classes

workbooks, matching pictures to hangul: |한글|

instead of admitting not knowing

|한글|

mute greeting, feigned concentration

|한글|

cycling through 영어: English to [forget]

what is right, what is correct, choose, choose, choose

admit to losing words: [잊어(버렸어)요]

(to throw away)

He knows how to speak a little | | |

how to read and write | | |

In Korea, written exams
only account for 30 percent of tests.

It's because he only spoke English with his grandfather

I tried watching soaps, trying to hear to understand
the drama in mouths moving,
but knowledge is subtitled.

With closed eyes, certain phrases translate with the life of a match
in a cave – silence: *dumb*: 바보
a frustrated father asked of me, are you silence?

I let my stare speak, let the space
between us carry my shame, give it room
to take shape,
what felt like soul rising through
my chest into a cough
where defeat is sickness
is language: mucus to throw away,
always letting out.

THE KOREAN SYLLABLE

I. Chosong – initial consonant

My friend called me 형: hyeong, older brother.
I made it a point to speak only Korean with him
while he used English. When I gave up
forging thoughts into noise, mind translating –
a marquee flashes with spurts of charged
battery – my English emerged.

II. Jongsong – peak vowel

He told me my Korean has an American accent,
heavy with apples to zebras stuck in my throat
gutters – consonants pulled rather than flowing
from vocal organs. Where are you, King
Sejong? Guide my tongue as a brush: it thirsts
for paper relief from an endless ravine.

III. Jongsong – final consonant

I force fingers into my throat like accusations,
engrave shapes in the passage to remembering,
hoping to vomit ink, stroke earth as a page
with the dance of my calligraphy.

PORTRAIT OF JOHN KIM, ANOTHER NATIVE SPEAKER

John Kim draws a horizon – there is a view. Don't get lost, John Kim. Somewhere, a door slams shut. Right on his face. The earth is flat too. He leans a right triangle on horizon line, and there he finds a nose. The ocean is broad. Might need the door as a raft later. Classmates draw his face, stick figures colliding into walls, tripping onto floors. They replace his head altogether, a shovel instead, sometimes with eyes. They say he's hard to read. Poker face. John Kim bows to the earth and his cheekbones align against the dirt. Shovel into dirt. He takes it in mouthfuls, doing as his face is meant to. He digs with teeth and finds stones, almost swallows them whole. He takes swings at his forehead and cheeks.

He wants to know if his face is harder. John Kim wishes he was hollow. Blames his parents for this earth. He strikes until something changes. Until he can be read. Each blow sounds like *more*. The stone faces speak. They could never call his bluff. Silence is his patient vulture, waiting to feed in the gore of his cards. Carcass. Such thirst for his own blood.

Maybe he can break. His voice. Not so flat anymore. When scavengers swoop for his windpipes, John Kim snaps their necks. Rips off their beaks. He begins to carve unsaid feeling onto bruise.

ODE TO ALTERNATIVE SKIN CARE



My radiance is regime: Cleopatra
bathing in goat's milk, a sleep mask

mocking tomorrow with the wet skin
of a ghost I pretend to be, red dragon

blood resin fights my ancient war
with acne. When I run out of funds,

I pluck starfish from reefs and shores,
blending them for extract to treat

dehydrated looks. I collect snails from
gardens and feed them red ginseng

to ensure quality slime, whipping
this with guts into cream d'escargot

body lotion and blemish balm.
Nothing stops my daily routine.

Not even the horse I butchered
for unsaturated fatty acids, the pig

I strangled for collagen peptide making
skin elastic. This is how I farm.



BLOSSOM

Clinics line Gangnam
& I long for a fine-tip pen
to mark
 coordinates

for knife to follow. I've written
my checklist on a scroll,
torn up by procedure –
they say
 pain leads you

to white blossoms:
everything I want done
to my body,
 preserves

me in petals, heavy as snow,
as I become through bandage,
also waiting to be
 undone.

--

Surgeon hands me a hammer
Our patients like to contour:
you do the breaking, we'll
restructure strikes on jaw sound
like wood shaping into a home.
Cement cracks on a worn out
staircase leading to an entrance.

South Korea spends \$4 million annually to promote the tourism industry. Book your tour today & receive a special offer on a travel deal that includes sightseeing, shopping, & plastic surgery.

Keep me awake, kiss my chin
with scalpel. It moves with
a feather's grace as it falls,
only to be replaced for
flight.

The chiseling repeats, a sharp knuckle
strikes, leads to fist pounding,
pulse, urgency for shelter
on the door of stranger's home –
myself tomorrow.

Sign up for a premier package as a gold club rewards member & you will be
escorted from the hotel to the clinic in a stretch limo for a same day consultation/surgery.

- - -

I want to watch the act of being opened.
Suction the excess, skin is earth. Blood
is sediment before it dries. Underneath
I'll keep my silicone jewels. *You need
correction if you habitually frown every time
you open your eyes.* I'll never leave home
to avoid the sun. Whiten my face so I may glow
without it. Even the moon can govern
dreams from its place, light up a room, still be
distant & searched for as the end of a
cosmic sentence
in the night sky.

- - -

Before &
 Three months After

I replace my
 walls with mirrors

so my apartment
 breathes with fog

& farewells
 as I pass by.

The light captures,
 incubates, my cells

are planets
 needing life.

Look at my
 celestial body,

how cosmic
 becomes cosmetic

covering God's
 wrong.

They say multiple
 stabbings

are crimes
 of passion,

an act of revision
 & revenge –

PRAYER FOR AN ASPIRING K-POP STAR

Dear Father of the holy
trinity – SM, YG, JYP

Entertainment, blessed be
the fame you deny

me yet. I see futures
in music video dance

sets, though mother
has scarred my calves

for every study failure;
father has pulled

my hair to match leaves
from willow trees.

Dearest Father above
them both, when will others

mock my dance? The stars
have stolen my teeth

from every camera smile.
I'm cursed with bad skin:

I will make the cut –
my old pelt ribbons,

a bundle of wood shavings
looping onto the floor.

I am a ruby underneath
waiting to renew.

Hold me up against full
spectrum light

and watch it sing
right through.

A MAGICIAN NEVER REVEALS

Mother asks if you are warm, questioning whether
you can walk the strip on Inchon-dong for lunch,
order food from vendors. You wear your father's coat.
The bandages around your mouth have been in place
for years, regenerating into skin keeping your lips still.
You must unravel and wear these rags as a scarf
on your neck, check their tears as references. Your elders
ask if you understand, if you can read or write.
You speak through fabric but its length braids around your
chest. This vest weighs your words attempting to glow
as yellowing lyrics on a karaoke screen, weaving into
a straitjacket, tight while you suspend in disbelief and stir
within, against padded walls, against chrysalis waiting
to be broken. You emerge, like a Houdini trick finale,
and bring home something to eat.

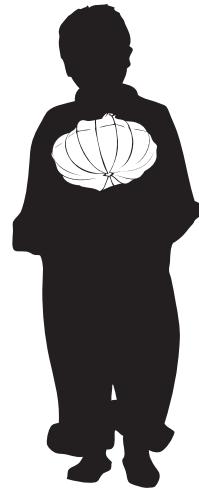
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