

“The beauty, intensity, and breadth of E. J. Koh’s work continues to transcend to new levels. Her language is transformative, making history more alive than we can feel and understand alone. Here is a chorus of lives and a song of peace. With *The Liberators*, Koh cements her place as one of the greatest Korean American writers of our time.”

—**JOSEPH HAN**,
author of *Nuclear Family*

“E. J. Koh brings a poet’s eye and sensibility to this remarkable novel. Here you will find characters and sentences that will leave you gasping for more. *The Liberators* captures grief and paranoia and a legacy of colonialism and violence with beauty and measure and grace.”

—**MATTHEW SALESSES**,
author of *The Sense of Wonder*

“E. J. Koh’s *The Liberators* is a sublime achievement for its deft political and emotional intelligence, its fine-tuned grasp of how a divided country divides lives through the generations. As in all great works of art, it uses the earth-bound to transport us to a realm that feels like it’s been unperceived until now. As readers, we enter a theater of raw perception. A tree falls out of nowhere, a boar walks into a room unannounced, shadows shatter across a ceiling. Illumination can happen at any turn, reminding us that there’s always more world than we’ve had the capacity to see.”

—**PAUL LISICKY**,
author of *Later: My Life at the Edge of the World*

“An elegiac, ferocious, and deeply stirring novel. E. J. Koh melds image and story together precisely, holding up to light the history and making of Korea. I loved *The Liberators* not only for what it shows us about our world, but moreso, ourselves.”

—**CRYSTAL HANA KIM**,
author of *If You Leave Me*

“*The Liberators* is a poetic breath, the language as haunting and epic as its story of a divided country’s legacy and impact on the Korean diaspora. I’ll read anything that E. J. Koh writes.”

—**KRYS LEE**,
author of *How I Became a North Korean*

“As readers of E. J. Koh’s *The Liberators* we’re asked to occupy the boundaries of a divided country, the world of two colonizers, and a family’s eventual journey to America where the demarcation lines shift to the palm of one’s hand, in the heart and life lines, where the words for love and survival are spelled out in the hand, where Koh’s lyrical narrative hand is held over our hearts in undying allegiance.”

—**SHAWN WONG**,
author of *American Knees*

“E. J. Koh’s poetic voice lends itself beautifully to the aching slowness of the search for healing. This book is about intergenerational trauma but it is also a celebration of intergenerational hope. Koh tackles history and sorrow with a delicate hand.”

—**ROWAN HISAYO BUCHANAN**,
author of *The Sleep Watcher*

“E. J. Koh brings her elegant poet’s hand to this intimate and expansive mythic novel of four generations of a family suffering sudden absences and war, seeking love and connection, weighted with the complexities of no easy answers. I didn’t want this book to end.”

—**JIMIN HAN,**

author of *The Apology*

“A piercing, patient debut by one of our finest chroniclers of American han. You won’t know what hit you until the final, perfect image.”

—**ED PARK,**

author of *Same Bed Different Dreams*

THE LIBERATORS

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The Magical Language of Others

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THE LIBERATORS

A NOVEL

E. J. KOH



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
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For borders—real and imaginary

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THE LIBERATORS

I

INVISIBLE LINES

1980-1983

I

YOHAN

Daejeon, 1980

BY AN EARLY AGE, I COULD READ AND WRITE IN SIX languages. I found a tool—an ink brush, a twig, or my stub finger—and used it to draw a character on parchment, dirt, or air. When one line touched another, my heart reached my fingertips to impart meaning. At five, it was for pleasure that I left words all over town: on a tree, I carved *tree*; in the river, I spelled *river* in pebbles; on my mother's dress, I inked *dress*. At some point, my mother set me down and didn't pick me up again. On my mother's grave, I wrote *grave*. I was just a boy at the end of Japanese colonial rule. I wrote my words as if I couldn't

live without them, as if I were made of nothing but words. I classed *rock*, *plant*, *animal*, *man*, and *God*. I observed a patch of weeds and then myself in the mirror to see the differences between *plant* and *man*. Between them was a middle point, or *animal*. I asked what stood between *man* and *God*, but the grave said nothing. I watched the country divided up as spoils of war. When I was fifteen, I was taken in for vandalism and sent to the military. I labeled my boots *boots*, and my gun *gun*. I spelled *fire* with sticks, lit it up in flames. Penned *grenade*, pulled the ring. My last words I wrote on the side of an ICU tent, filled with my dismembered comrades, in the blood I owed them: *death, death, death*.

After my years in the military, I was made of silence. I carried out my duties quickly and without protest. Peeled out the bunks, torn and stiff, and myself, thirsty and whiskered, I worked the sprawl, search, and rescue; leashed the dogs; unspooled rope; baked bodies; collected resin for fuel tanks; plunged drills down holes; poked at slugs with my rifle. One day the older recruits marched me to the showers and told me to get prim. I accepted two medals for protecting foreign dignitaries. My director and department were shocked to hear I wanted to retire to a lowly auditor at the age of twenty-four. They were puzzled by my decision, but after a roomful of handshakes, after I'd surrendered my clothes for the next soldier, my leaky and clouded binoculars, and a tin of hand-rolled cigarettes, I was installed in Daejeon as the youngest superior at the office. I so assumed my position nobody called me again.

I never asked what wonders I might have been capable of had I been left as the boy filled with words, or whether foreign dignitaries might have come from across the ocean to witness how I read and wrote throughout fall, winter, spring, and summer. I pictured my mother outside my room, telling visitors not to wake me since I needed my rest, and myself, stirring up with a smile before I snuggled back into the covers. I didn't regret that she had died before the surrender since she had not lived to see the war. Rather than words—using them whenever it snowed or rained or blossomed or the sun touched me on my way to the office—I grew skilled in courting. It didn't come easy, but I understood courting fundamentally. Courting was forcing a thing to become unlike itself. I had become removed from my own nature. So I married and had a daughter. I changed the structure of myself—an animal into a man—to love my wife. Then only life could change what God intended to be human into an animal, even into a plant, vulnerable to the crush of a heel or an aneurysm. To replace a rock in the ground with my wife, then my wife with a gravestone on the surface.

~

ONE MORNING IN 1980, I was in my midforties, when I picked up the phone and called my employee. At twenty-

three, my daughter was one of few unmatched girls her age, and my employee had two sons who wanted to build airplanes. His sons sketched planes on their napkins. A perfect tea set of aeronautical engineers. I rang from the guest room on the first floor, my late wife's room. The windows overlooked the steps to the entrance where tall iron gates jostled in the wind. The fog drew rosefinches, like blooms in the low bush, whose cries I mistook for rainfall. On the news, threats loomed—they argued about the North Korean underground tunnels. The third tunnel had been found some years earlier, less than thirty miles from the capital. Tunnels ignited fears about spies hiding among us. GIs left their bases and camptown brothels, in such numbers since the war, and arrived with the trains' pipe-organ whistles.

My employee answered with a smile in his voice. He said my daughter was a beauty, but she was the spitting image of her mother, who'd died from heartbreak. I said it was an aneurysm—he suspected it was the same thing. I was certain he meant no harm. My employee said it was natural that I wanted my daughter married, so I could bring another woman into the home. I would need a girlfriend soon. By the time I recognized his meaning, enough time had passed to make my silence inappropriate. I thought carefully of what to say: "A widower feels a widow's sorrow." My employee agreed that it must be lonely living with my daughter. He encouraged me to do what was in my best interest, like the Americans. I bargained for his youngest son. My employee said his wife wouldn't agree to it. She thought it too early for

me to marry again. He'd rather talk about the riots and the spies from the North. After the phone call, I was discouraged enough to give up. But my late wife, Namjo, had told me it could be one man who turned our lives around, and wasn't that man also looking for us?

My daughter's room was empty. On the dining table, rice and soup bowls, two pale moons left under the lace-work of a cover sewn by my late wife. I dug through my phone book, finding the matchmaker's number. She'd have no qualms because this was her business. But she, too, answered with a gripe. She said there should be a line of suitors out the door, but everyone was paranoid. Without peace in this country, what could we do but find peace in our homes? People would forgive me about my wife, but I better move out of the house because my son-in-law couldn't go into the kitchen without goosebumps. "A house with a heartbroken woman," she said, "can never be a home." That afternoon, I felt unwell and boiled water for tea. Why couldn't they invite us over for dinner and pull me aside and say I'd raised a good family? The problems with my choices could wait, but Namjo had asked me to secure a better home for our daughter. The drawers hid their knives. The drain filled with hair. Shadows of lilac stems crossed the room, so polite they could shut the door behind them. The floor pulsed with dust caught in the broad light. Namjo had always worn green, her ribbons like curling leaf tips—it brought me such memories. Then a sharp whistle on the stove.

~

CURFEW WAS TWO HOURS PAST. I switched on the television for the noise. It wasn't enough to drown out the voice of my late wife.

How can Insuk show her face to her classmates and teachers?

I didn't know, so I raised the volume. The news was censored. Nothing but a statement about a civil commotion. The protesters looked about Insuk's age.

We all grew up in one house and died in one house. That's normal. You can't buy a new house every time somebody croaks.

I thought my wife would've liked a new house away from everyone. On the television, I spotted my employee's youngest son, his school ID hung around his neck.

They talk like that because I'm dead. Yohan, when you're dead, they won't remember the awful things they said to you.

The student protesters had been lined up.

Why're they scaring those poor kids?

Namjo kept her carriage upright no matter how restless she felt, her hands running along the side seams of her dress.

They look like Insuk, don't they?

The brigade raised their rifles. I recognized the slight movement before the stillness of their aim.

Yohan.

Their stance was so rigid you could've picked them up and their bodies would have remained in their exact position. Their skin and uniforms I could tell reeked of smoke. The light that reflected on their helmets also reflected on

their boots. Their fingers relaxed in the crooks of the triggers, all their weight and strength gathered in their jaws with no expressions on their faces. Their eyes dilated as they emptied their cartridges of bullets into the students.

Yohan!

Among them, my employee's youngest would leave no record of his arrest and death, and no meaning at all.

Yohan, go!

Perhaps he realized this truth as he looked toward the sky and shook as if his body were a garment on a clothesline.

~

I PACED THE MAIN road for an hour. I had my head on backward, eyeing passersby. After the coup d'état, martial law was enforced and spread like ink on wet paper, bleeding university closures and mass arrests. They classified protests to end martial law as riots instigated by spies. The Korean military began a suppression campaign to win the country back, beginning in the southeastern city of Gwangju—the center of the protests—and the military was backed by American diplomacy flexing its muscles to practice war games. Aircraft were deployed. Tear gas was shot into buses, police batons waited at the doors. Truck beds with amps, empty wig shops, bodies on handcarts. We joined the twentieth-century tradition of killing Koreans, as if to say no one can do it like us.

Now of all times, I recalled that the bookcase once fell on our baby daughter. I'd gone to stop it, but the hefty books crashed down, and my wife threw herself on top of our daughter. I never thought to do what she did—it was the difference between us. Perhaps we ought to join my wife in the habit of the ground. There would be nothing for us to say once we had her to put all things into their place. She would tell us what had been set into motion—like a single thread unraveling a silk tapestry—when we'd turned against ourselves and called each other the enemy. What we had to forsake to lose a part of ourselves. The way a man could kill his own brother if it saved him from hating himself another second. I wanted to ask Namjo whether a country split in half was still a country. Perhaps it was more terrifying if there were no spies. If there was no one but us.

~

OUT OF THE DAMP mesh of night, I waited for Insuk in a nearby bar. It was L-shaped with one wall lined with lockers for college students. The tree growing over the building had thick branches, showing the bar's age. I took a seat at the window facing the one-way road going uphill toward my house.

A young man carrying books under his arm walked in. I recognized the books because my daughter had them. He was in the same year as her.

The young man was long and slender like a stalk of bamboo. His family must've been worse off. Few people would notice since he dressed neatly and looked at ease—a properly raised child—but I saw faint creases at the tops of his leather shoes. They were at least two sizes too big.

He sat at the window, one seat away from me.

As I suspected, he didn't order a drink. He grabbed a fistful of free macaroni popcorn. The owner complained it was for regulars and gave it to him on a napkin.

My attention drifted from my beer to the young man. He was bound to notice I was looking at him.

He kept his eyes on the road. "Can I help you, sir?"

"No, no, son." The young man could change into a looming figure in a short time if he willed himself to—the sort of man who had only brothers. I sensed a taut line of control running through him. Though it was clear he didn't want to talk, I couldn't help myself. "You're waiting for a girl. With the country falling apart."

"Just a friend." The young man was still staring ahead. "With all due respect, the country is falling apart because of people like you." It was an accusation.

"So it is a girl." I watched him for another moment, then said, "Your friend coming down that road?"

The young man looked at me and back at the road.

I was now certain he was waiting for my daughter. My house was at the end of that road. But the young man didn't seem to be aware I was my daughter's father.

"You're not at the protests," I said.

The young man tried to hide his agitation by feeling the bones in his hands. “The police will have their murders. The locals will have their graves.” He put his feet on the ledge under the bar, winding his words up. “The state will have their memorials—erase our memories with national history.”

“You aren’t worried about the tunnels?”

“The tunnels are a ploy to make us feel contaminated with spies. It makes any action justifiable, as long as we can make ourselves clean.”

“And where does your friend fit into your plans?”

The young man appeared to let his guard slip. “You can’t tell her what to do.” So he was in love with her.

Up close, the young man was dumber than I’d thought. Only his posture gave the impression of composure. “You’re about that age. You done with your military service?”

“No. I have buddies who left already.”

“Oh, your buddies putting down the protests on TV?”

“They’re waiting for orders to retreat.”

“I spent some years taking off my combat boots.” I stole a macaroni, popped it into my mouth. “Problem is she won’t wait for you to be done with your service. Happens to everybody. You’re sent in, and the older guys who’re done, they come back the same year as your girl, except she calls him oppah now. It’s better to date after you’re released. Someone younger won’t resent you for leaving her so long, and she might like your stories.”

During training, on the obstacle course, I couldn’t fit into a narrow tube with the drinking of my college years.

As punishment, I'd had to clean the warehouse urinal troughs with a toothbrush. Still, it was easier than digging trenches—instead of a shovel, they'd given me a spoon.

"I got rid of all the spoons in my house. Nobody can use a spoon. Only chopsticks. We drink our broth by lifting our bowls to our mouths."

"What about your toothbrushes?"

I grinned. "Here, take my drink."

He declined and followed my gaze to the road. A soft light fell from the foliage above us.

"She's a little older than me. She took some time off because her mother passed." The young man was inquisitive. "Did yours wait for you?"

The question caught me unprepared.

"She did but only because she's so stubborn." I leaned forward with my glass. "My wife always said—if you have no teeth, then use your gums. But if my wife had no gums, she'd used her jaw bones," and we laughed at the picture.

The young man wrote on his napkin. Then passed it to me, saying he had written it down because it'd be rude to say out loud to his senior. I stared at the dark lines. "Your handwriting," and I touched the ink. "The hanja looks different."

The young man apologized. "I taught myself, so it looks upside down sometimes. But it's all there," he said. "The Chinese is precise. But the Korean is undeniable."

His handwriting reminded me of characters I hadn't thought of in ages, and I couldn't keep myself from tracing over the lines—crossing over to the boy at the river

who had spelled with pebbles, who recognized the shape of his mother in the clouds, an angel I thought my mind wouldn't notice again.

On the napkin were characters for *good* and *man*.

Before I could answer him, my daughter appeared on the road in front of the window. The threat of curfew couldn't disrupt her slow and even pace. She stopped before us.

It was the young man's turn to show his shock.

He looked at my daughter and me with newfound recognition. The young man now seemed to take hold of the reins he had let go of earlier while sitting with a stranger. He greeted me for the first time and bowed from the waist.

~

BACK AT MY HOUSE, the young man apologized again for not knowing who I was. Normally, I took the sofa, but I sat on a floor cushion across from my daughter. The young man kneeled on a cushion by the door.

"You can't live by yourself," I said to Insuk.

Her eyes lit up like rooms. "I can't leave you, especially right now."

With my wife gone, Insuk released the knife of judgment I held against my own throat. But her consideration of me made me sorrier. It was fair for my daughter to despise me—the gates were still slick with her tears, their dark

footprints over the stone steps. Her mother's black-ribboned photograph greeted her under the stairs.

"We will find you a husband." These next words were meant for the young man. "I've set up a few blind dates for you, Insuk."

She pointed at the young man, whose face went red.

I felt as if my daughter had come to my aid. "Who exactly is he to you?"

"He would do anything for me."

"I'm sorry about all this," said the young man.

"Good," I said to her. "He has kind eyes."

Insuk kneeled and forced the young man to move closer. His shirt was drenched in sweat.

"We're going to get married," Insuk said.

"Sir, I don't know what to say."

"Only if you agree to it," I said to her.

Insuk nodded. "Then we can do it tonight."

"Tonight—as in get married?" he asked.

I turned to Insuk. "Are you sure?"

"I'll get our nice glasses and the oak-aged soju in the pantry." She fetched the soju and the glasses and filled them.

We each took one and raised it. Insuk proposed that we finish the bottle that night. It was this sense of celebration that had drawn me to her mother.

"What's your name, son?"

"Sungho," she said slowly. "Sung-ho."

The textured walls looked soft like napkins. The cushion's peony pattern. My hand, blooming capillaries. I noticed for the first time, under the stairs, Namjo's small smile—it

was a privilege, the conversation between a man and his late wife. “Sungho,” I said to him. “Even lifting a sheet of paper is better done together.” I understood the urge to dig a tunnel and go underground and live in the perpetual dark. Like a children’s game where hiding was equally motivated by the desire to be found. To pass through a tunnel was to one day be seen. To be a spy was to one day be known. Even the dead, in the grips of dying, were as close as possible to feeling alive.