

Fruit of My Woman Main Texts

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Part - 1

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I registered my wife's words as a mere disturbance in the fabric of silence rather than processing their meaning. I glanced up at her absent-mindedly. I sat bolt upright. Marking what I'd been reading in the paper with a finger, I scrubbed my eyes with the palm of my hand. My wife had lifted her vest up to her bra; deep bruises mottled her back and stomach. 'How did you get those?' Twisting at the waist just enough for me to see the vertebrae marching up from the zip of her pleated skirt. Pale blue bruises the size of a newborn's fist, as distinct as though they'd been printed in ink. 'Well? How did you get them?' My sharp, insistent tone ruptured the still space enclosed in our eighteen-p'yong flat.

'I don't know . . . I just assumed I must have knocked into something without realising, and the bruises would go away . . . but they're actually getting bigger.' My wife avoided my gaze like a child caught doing something wrong. Slightly regretting having seemed to scold her, I made an effort to soften my tone. 'Doesn't it hurt?' 'No, not at all. There's actually no sensation at all in

the bruised parts. But, you know, that's even more worrying.' The guilty expression I'd noticed a few moments ago had vanished without a trace, replaced by a gentle, incongruous smile. That smile played around my wife's lips as she asked if she ought to go to the hospital. Feeling oddly withdrawn from the whole situation, I examined my wife's face with a cool, dispassionate gaze. The face I was confronted with felt unfamiliar. It felt unfamiliar, almost unreal; nothing like what one would expect given that we were in our fourth year of cohabitation.

My wife was three years younger than me, she had turned twenty-nine that year. Her face used to make her look embarrassingly young when we went out together, before we were married – she was frequently mistaken for a schoolgirl. It now bore clear signs of fatigue, which jarred with her look of wide-eyed innocence. It seemed unlikely that anyone would mistake her for a schoolgirl anymore, or even a university student. If anything, she actually looked older than her age. Her cheeks, the colour of unripe apples into which the red has just begun to rise, were sunken, like knocked-in clay. The waist that had been as soft and pliant as a sweet potato seedling, the stomach that once had such an appealing set of curves, were now pitifully lean. I struggled to recall the last occasion that I'd seen my wife naked, and it had been bright enough to see her properly. Not that year, for sure; I wasn't even certain that it had happened the year before.

How could I have failed to notice such deep bruises on the body of the only person I lived with? I tried to count the fine wrinkles radiating out from the corners of my wife's eyes. Then I told her to take off all her clothes. A red flush appeared along the line of her cheekbones, which her weight loss had left indecently sharp. She tried to remonstrate with me. 'What if someone sees?' Unlike most flats, which are laid out facing a garden or car park, our balcony looked out onto the main eastern road. Since we were three streets away from the nearest apartment block, separated from it by both the main road and Chungnang stream, it would be impossible for anyone to pry without a high-powered telescope. There was certainly no danger of anyone catching a glimpse of our living room from inside one of the cars speeding along the road. So I simply took my wife's protest as a sign of embarrassment. On weekends as newly weds, in this selfsame living room, with both the glass door leading onto the veranda and the window on its far side flung wide open in an attempt to mitigate the sweltering August heat, we used to make love several times in the middle of the day, clumsily exploring this thing that was so new to us until we eventually succumbed to the weight of exhaustion.

After a year or so had passed we were no longer so unaccustomed to our love, and the fervour of those early days gradually dissipated. My wife went to bed quite early, and she was an unusually deep sleeper. If I returned home late, I could take it as a given that she would already have fallen asleep. When I turned my key in the front door's lock and stepped into the

flat, alone and with no one to greet me, washed myself and entered the darkened bedroom, the even cadences of her breathing struck me as inexplicably desolate. If I embraced her, hoping to ease this loneliness, her half-open, sleep-clouded eyes gave me no clue as to whether she was rejecting my embrace or warmly returning it. She only swept her silent fingers through my hair until the movements of my body stopped.

‘Everything? You want me to take everything off?’ Her crumpling face struggling to suppress an outburst of tears, my wife rolled the underwear she’d just removed into a ball, and covered her pubic area. And there was her naked body, fully exposed in the spring sunshine. It really had been a long time. And yet I was unable to feel even the faintest stirrings of desire. Seeing the yellowish-green bruises not only on her buttocks but also on her ribs and shins, marring even the white flesh on the insides of her thighs, anger seized me, then just as suddenly relinquished its grip, leaving in its wake an unwarranted melancholy. For this woman, whose mind so easily wandered, had sleep dissolved even the memory of walking along the street early one evening – senses already dulled by sleep’s descending curtain – blundering into a slow-moving car, or perhaps of losing her step and tumbling down the unlit emergency stairs in our building? The figure of my wife, standing there shielding her pubic area as the late spring sunshine streamed onto her back, absent-mindedly asking whether she ought to go to the hospital, was just too wretched, pitiful, sorrowful for words, so that I was touched with a sadness I hadn’t felt in a long time. I could only hold her skinny body against me.

Part - 2

I assumed everything would be fine. And that was why I’d taken my wife’s bony frame in my arms that spring day and said, ‘If they’re not hurting then no doubt the bruises will fade soon enough. You never used to get yourself in such a mess, now did you?’ I softened the reproach with a loud laugh. One night in early summer the heat-saturated wind rubbed its sticky cheeks against the leaves of tall sycamores, and the streets with bloodshot eyes flickered from light to dark. My wife, who sat across from me at the table as we shared a late dinner, laid her spoon down with a clatter. I’d completely forgotten about her bruises. ‘Well, it’s strange . . . have another look.’

Having examined the two gaunt arms protruding from her short sleeves, my wife briskly stripped off her T-shirt and bra. A brief moan escaped me before I could swallow it back.

The bruises that had been the size of a newborn’s fist the previous spring were now more like large taro leaves. On top of that, they’d darkened. They were the dull colour of a weeping willow’s branches, whose pale green seems tinged with a hint of blue at the onset of summer. I stretched out a trembling hand and stroked my wife’s bruised shoulder, feeling as though it

were a stranger's body I was touching. How painful must it have been, for bruises like these? Now I come to think of it, I noticed that my wife's face, too, was burnished with blue that day, as though suffused with lead water. Her formerly glossy hair was as brittle as dried radish leaves. The whites of her eyes presented a pale indigo hue, as though the ink of her unusually black pupils had bled into them. Her eyes glittered with moisture.

'Why is this happening to me? I keep wanting to go outside, and as soon as I do . . . as soon as I see the sunlight, in fact, I get the urge to take my clothes off. It's as though my body wants them off.' My wife stood up, giving me the plainest view I'd had all year of her withered, naked frame. 'The day before yesterday, I went out onto the balcony with nothing on and stood next to the washer-dryer. Not knowing if anyone could see me . . . and not even trying to hide myself . . . I mean, like I was some crazy woman!' I did nothing but sit and stare at my wife's scrawny upper half as it approached me, nervously running my fingers along the edges of the chopsticks I was holding. 'I've lost my appetite, too. I'm drinking more water than I used to, though . . . I can't even manage half a bowl of rice in a whole day. And because I'm not eating, I guess my stomach acid isn't being secreted properly or something. Even if I force myself to eat, it doesn't get digested properly and I just keep throwing it back up again.' She crumpled to her knees like a puppet whose strings had been cut and buried her face in my thigh. Surely she wasn't crying? A warm, damp patch formed on my tracksuit bottoms.

'Do you know what it feels like to be throwing up several times a day? It's like having motion sickness even though you're standing on solid ground; you have to walk hunched over, it's impossible to straighten up. Your head hurts like . . . like your right eye is boring into it. Your shoulders are stiff as a board, you salivate, yellow stomach acid on the paving slab, on the roots of the roadside trees . . .' An insect's high whine could be heard coming from the failing fluorescent lamp. Under its thick light, my wife, a bruise on her back the size of a catalpa leaf, managed to kill the whimpering sound trickling out of her.

'Go to the hospital,' I told her, looking her in the face. 'Tomorrow, go straight to the internal medicine department.' Her wet, blotchy face was unsightly. As my splayed fingers ran through my wife's brittle hair, I gave her a toothy smile. 'And do be careful how you go. You don't want to be hurting yourself again. It's not as though you're a child, to be falling over and bumping into things.' My wife's wet face trembled into a smile, and a single tear that clung to her lips elongated and detached itself.

Part - 3

Had my wife always had such a propensity for tears? No, she hadn't. The first time I saw her cry, she was twenty-six. As a young girl she'd been more easily moved to laughter, her voice

always shot through with that bright undertone, laughter as a wash of colour. I heard that voice, its calm maturity usually at odds with her youthful looks, quaver for the first time when she told me, 'I hate living in the Sanggye-dong high-rises.' 'Seven hundred thousand people all crammed together, I feel like I'm going to wither and die. I hate these hundreds and thousands of identical buildings, identical kitchens, identical ceilings, identical toilets, bathtubs, balconies and lifts, and I hate the parks, the rest areas, the shops, the pedestrian crossings. I hate them all.'

'What's brought this on, hmm?' I spoke as if soothing a fractious child, having paid more attention to the softness of my wife's voice than to what she was actually saying. 'What's there to dislike about a lot of people living near each other?' I adopted a somewhat stern expression as I looked into my wife's eyes. Her vivid, flashing eyes. 'I would always make sure the rooms I rented stood near the entertainment district. I'd only move to places that were swarming with people, where thumping music spilled out into the streets and the cars clogged the roads and blared their horns. I couldn't have coped otherwise. I couldn't have coped with being alone.' Even as my wife dashed the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand, they were replaced in continuous flow. 'And now, it's like I'm going to fall into some lingering illness and die. Like I won't be able to get down from this thirteenth floor, like I won't be able to get outside.'

'Why are you making such a song and dance about it? Seriously, it's a bit much.' In our first year here in these high-rise flats, my wife was quite often ill. She'd been used to the natural environment of a rented room in one of Seoul's hillier districts, and her body seemed unable to adjust to a central-heated, tightly-sealed flat. Her energy levels soon slumped, admitting no more than a brisk walk up a steep slope once a day in order to get to the small publishing house where she worked for a pittance. But it wasn't because of our marriage that she quit her job. It was only after she quit, not long after, in fact, that I'd talked of marriage concretely. She'd taken out all the money she had – whatever she'd put aside from her monthly salary and pension allowance, plus any extra from part-time work at weekends – and was planning on leaving the country.

'I want to go and get some new blood in my veins,' she said. This was the evening of the day when she'd finally given her letter of resignation to her immediate superior. She told me she wanted to transfuse the bad blood that was clotting up her veins like cysts and flush out her tired old lungs with fresh air. Living and dying freely had been her dream ever since she was a child, she said; she'd been putting it off because the time wasn't right, but now she felt that she'd saved up enough to make her dream a reality. She planned to pick a country, stay there for six months or so, then move on somewhere else, and so on. 'I want to do it before I die, you

know,' she said, and gave a low chuckle. 'I want to see the very edge of the world. To get as far away as possible, bit by bit.'

But in the end, instead of setting out for the world's edge, my wife poured all her meagre funds into the deposit for this flat and our wedding costs. She'd explained this all to me in a single short sentence, saying she'd done it 'because it's not like I can part from you'. How real had been this dream of hers, this dream of freedom? Considering that she'd been able to relinquish it so easily, I assumed not very. The whole thing must have been nothing more than an unrealistic, romantic delusion, and the plans she'd made no more feasible than those a child might concoct for travelling to the moon. In the end, she must have realised all this by herself, and I felt vaguely moved and proud to think that I must have been the one who'd prompted this belated realisation.

It was probably all down to her frequent aches and pains, but when I saw my wife standing with her cheek pressed against the glass door to the balcony, her narrow shoulders drooping like wilted cabbage leaves as she stared down at the speeding cars, my heart sank. She was so still, only the incredibly faint sound of her breathing confirmed she was still alive; as though a pair of invisible arms pinioned her shoulders, as though a massive iron ball attached to an invisible chain prevented her from so much as flexing a single muscle.

In the depths of night and the small hours of the morning, my wife would awake with a start, disturbed by the occasional taxi or motorbike as it roared down the otherwise deserted street. 'It's like the road's speeding rather than the cars, like this flat is being swept away with the road,' she said. Even after the noise of the engines had receded into the distance and sleep had reclaimed her, my wife's lovely face was deathly pale. On one such night, my wife mumbled as though in a dream, her hoarse voice only barely audible: 'All that stuff, where did it come from . . . where is it all running off to?'

Part - 4

The next evening, when I opened the front door and stepped inside the flat, I saw that my wife had come to the door to greet me, presumably having heard my footsteps in the corridor. She was barefoot and the curve of her toenails, which she hadn't been trimming as often as she should have, gleamed white. 'What did they say at the hospital?' No answer. Having studied me in silence as I removed my shoes, my wife turned away, tucking behind her ear a lock of dull hair which had been resting on her cheek.

That profile, I thought to myself. I remembered how, when we were first introduced, a smooth silence elapsed after my senior at work – he played the role of the intermediary – got up and

left us alone, and how disconcerted I'd been by the secretive expression on my future wife's face. It made her look as though she was wandering somewhere far away, in some undisclosed location. In that face, which at first glance had seemed merely bright and lovely, I was able to read an unlooked-for loneliness, seemingly that of an entirely different person, and it was this that gave me the momentary conviction that she understood me. Then, too, when this conviction and the alcohol I'd drank led me to blurt out a confession, that I'd been lonely my whole life, the twenty-six-year-old woman who was to become my wife turned away to face some distant horizon, leaving me confronting the same cold, desolate profile I was faced with now.

'You did go to the hospital, right?' My wife inclined her head in the barest hint of a nod. Had she turned away in order to conceal her unhealthy complexion, or was there something I'd done? 'Come on, please, talk to me. What did the doctor say?' 'That it's fine,' she said, more like an exhalation than a statement. Her voice was frighteningly flat. At that initial meeting, it had been her voice that most attracted me to her. It was a senseless comparison, but her voice put me in mind of an elaborately glazed and lacquered tea table; one of those elegant pieces of furniture which you begrudge getting out for any but the most important guests, and on which it only seems right to serve the very best tea, in the very best cups. That night, apparently not the least ruffled by the confession I'd let slip, my wife's response had been perfectly matter-of-fact, and delivered in her usual composed tone of voice. And I, she'd said, I want to live my whole life without settling in a single place.

After that, I'd talked about plants. I told her I'd had a dream where the balcony was crowded with large flowerpots, each of them filled with green lettuces and perilla. In summer, tiny flowers would unfurl on the perilla plants like drops of snow. And there would be bean sprouts growing in the kitchen, I added. That finally wrung a faint laugh from my wife, who'd been fixing me with a sceptical stare as if all this talk of plants was very much at odds with her idea of me. Trying to cling on to the trailing end of that innocent, fragile laugh, I said the words again: 'I've been lonely my whole life.' After we were married, I put flowerpots out on the balcony as discussed, but neither of us proved to be particularly green-fingered. For whatever reason, even hardy greenstuffs, which I presumed would need nothing more than regular watering, withered and died without providing us with a single crop.

One person said that our upper-floor flat, was too far removed from the ground's energy; another told us our plants were all dying because the air and water was bad. We were even told that we lacked the good faith necessary to tend living things, but that simply wasn't true. The wholehearted manner in which my wife devoted herself to caring for those plants exceeded all expectations. If a lettuce or perilla plant withered, this would be enough to plunge

her into depression for half a day, while if one seemed to be still clinging tenaciously to life she would wander around humming a bright tune. For whatever reason, nothing now remained in the balcony's rectangular flowerpots other than dry soil. Where had they all gone, I wondered, all those dead plants? And what about those rainy days when I'd set the flowerpots up on the windowsill to dip their hands in the cold streaks of rain, where had all those young days gone?

My wife had turned to me and said, 'Let's go somewhere far away, the two of us.' Unlike the plants, which revived at least a little as their leaves took in that invigorating rain, my wife looked to be withering into an ever deeper state of depression. 'It's impossible to live in this stifling place,' she said, stretching her haggard hand out over the lettuce leaves to intercept the falling rain, which she then shook onto the balcony. 'This rain is filthy,' she said, 'black with snot and spittle.' Her eyes sought my agreement. 'This isn't living,' she spat out, 'it only looks like it.' Her voice was edged with hostility, like a drunk's slurring declamation, This country's rotten through! 'There's no way anything could grow here, don't you see? Not trapped here in this . . . in this stifling, deafening, place!' I couldn't stand it any longer.

'What's stifling?' I couldn't stand these sharp little jabs that blindly shattered my precarious new-found happiness, or the blood of long-suppressed misery which her words were drawing out of her wasted body. 'Tell me.' I splashed the rainwater I'd collected in my cupped hands over my wife's shoulders. 'What's stifling? What's deafening?' A low moan escaped from my wife, her startled hands flailing at her face. Cold rainwater splashed onto the balcony windowpane, onto my face. The flowerpot on the windowsill impaled my wife's foot on its sharp edge before crashing to the balcony floor. Rough potsherds and clumps of soil clung to my wife's clothes, her bare feet. She bent over, gripped the injured foot in both hands and bit her lower lip.

Biting her lip was a long-standing habit of hers; even back before we were married, she would do it whenever I got angry or raised my voice. Worrying at her lip seemed to help her set her thoughts in order, and after a while she would begin to reply to whatever it was I'd said or done, listing her points calmly and logically. But after that incident on the balcony, her bitten lip became the only response I could draw from her. We stopped arguing after that day. 'The doctor said there's nothing wrong?' I felt an intense wave of fatigue and loneliness. When I shrugged off my suit jacket, my wife didn't take it from me. 'He said he couldn't find anything wrong,' she confirmed, her face still turned away.

Part - 5

My wife gradually lost what little speech she'd retained. She didn't speak unless she was spoken to, and even then her only reply was a nod or shake of the head. If I raised my voice,

demanding that she answer me, she would just stare off into the distance, an equivocal look in her eyes. Her steadily worsening complexion was now clearly perceptible even under the dim light of the fluorescent lamp. Given that the doctor had said he couldn't find anything wrong, perhaps, rather than there being some physical problem with my wife's stomach or intestines, it was a simple case of yearning. But what on earth could she be yearning for? The past three years had been the warmest and most peaceful of my life. My work was not too taxing, I was lucky enough to have a landlord who didn't try and hike up the deposit for the flat, I'd almost paid off the mortgage for the new flat and I had a wife who, though she might not be stunningly attractive, was everything that I'd wanted in a partner; my contentment was like warm water lapping gently at the inner sides of a deeply filled bathtub, caressing my exhausted body.

So what was my wife's problem? If she really was hankering after something, I couldn't image how it could be so severe as to constitute a psychogenic illness. Every time I questioned whether this woman really had any right to cause me such loneliness, I felt as though my whole being was flooded with a boundless abhorrence, isolating me like a layer of old dust. The following Sunday morning, the day before I was due to take a week-long business trip abroad, I watched my wife shaking the laundry out on the balcony. The bruises now covered so much of her arms that the white parts of skin seemed like bruises in reverse, small white blotches among all that blue. I caught my breath. As she carried the empty laundry basket back into the living room, I blocked her way and demanded she take off her clothes. She resisted, but I got her T-shirt off, revealing a shoulder dyed a dark, dull blue.

I staggered back and stared at her body. More than half of her once-thick armpit hair had fallen out, and the colour had leached from her brown nipples, formerly soft and tender. 'Things can't go on like this. I'm going to phone your mother.' 'No, don't, I'll do it,' my wife shouted hastily, her pronunciation garbled as though she were chewing on her tongue. 'Go to the hospital, understand? Go to a dermatologist. No, go to a general hospital.' She nodded, mute. 'You know I don't have time to go with you. You know your own body, so you have to keep it in order, no?' She nodded again. 'Listen to me. Call your mother.' My wife carried on nodding, her lips pressed together. Did the nodding mean she was listening? Most likely, my words had gone in one ear and out the other; I could hear them falling to the living room floor, crumbling like cheap biscuits.

Part - 6

The doors of the lift rattled open. I walked down the darkened corridor carrying my cumbersome suitcase, and rang the bell. No response. I pressed my ear against the door's

gelid steel. I kept on pressing the bell, two times, three times, four times, checking that it was still working; it was, I could hear it ringing inside the flat, though the muffling effect of the door made it sound as though it was coming from somewhere much further away. I propped the suitcase against the door and looked at my watch. Eight in the evening. Granted, my wife was a heavy sleeper, but this was surely a bit much. I was worn out. I hadn't eaten, either. Just this one time, I didn't want the hassle of having to fish out my key. Perhaps my wife had called her mother and gone to the hospital as I'd told her to, or gone to stay with her relatives in the countryside. But no – as soon as I stepped through the door, I took in the familiar jumble of her slippers, trainers and smart shoes.

I eased my feet out of my own shoes and into my slippers, unconsciously registering the flat's usual chill. Before I'd taken a few steps, though, I became aware of a disgusting smell. I opened the fridge; inside it, the courgette and cucumber side dishes had wrinkled and warped into stinking, oozing clumps. Around half a bowl of rice had been left in the rice cooker; clearly it had been there for some time, as it had dried and stuck to the inner pan. When I opened the lid, the distinct smell of days-old rice flooded my nostrils along with the still-warm steam. There was a pile of dirty dishes in the sink and the sweet smell of rot was coming from the plastic washbowl on top of the washing machine, where the laundry sat puddled in grey soapy water.

My wife wasn't in the bedroom, the bathroom, or the spare room which we used for various things. I called out her name; no answer. In the living room there was only the morning newspaper, spread out as I'd left it the week before; an empty 500ml milk carton; a glass cup flecked with droplets of congealed milk; one of my wife's white socks, inside-out; and a red faux-leather purse; all scattered here and there. The roar of car engines as they sped down the main road cut a sharp incision into the solid mass of the flat's contained emptiness.

Because I was tired and hungry, because the crockery was all rusting in the sink's dishpan, without a single clean spoon for me to scoop up some rice, I felt lonely. Because I'd come back to an empty house after travelling such a great distance, because I wanted to talk about all those trivial things that happen on long distance flights, about the landscapes that had scudded past the window on foreign trains, because there was no one to ask 'Are you tired?', robbing me of the opportunity to demonstrate my endurance with a stoic 'I'm okay,' I was lonely. And because of this loneliness, I got angry. Because of the feeling that, owing to my body's insignificance, I was fundamentally unable to enmesh myself within the fabric of this world, because of the chill that was leaching through my suddenly flimsy clothes, and because of the thought that all I had managed in my life so far was to successfully kid myself that I was appreciated, I felt angry. Alone, and with no one to love me, my existence might as well have already been snuffed out.

Just at that moment, I heard a feeble voice. I turned in the direction of the sound. It was my wife's voice. A faint murmuring carried in from the balcony, impossible to decipher. Instantly, that intense loneliness morphed into a feeling of relief, and as I stomped over to the balcony I felt a burst of irritation come spiralling off the tip of my tongue. 'Why didn't you answer me if you've been there all this time?' I flung the veranda door open. 'Is this any way to run a household? What on earth have you been living on?' Then I saw my wife's naked body, and stopped. My wife was kneeling down, facing the grille that stretched across the balcony window, her two arms raised as though she was cheering. Her entire body was dark green. Her formerly shadowed face now gleamed like a glossy evergreen leaf. Her dried radish-leaf hair was as lustrous as the stems of wild herbs.

Her two eyes glittered pale in her green face. Turning to face me as I shrank back, she shifted as though to get up. But instead, spasms flinched uselessly up and down her legs. She seemed unable either to stand or walk. Her pliant waist torqued painfully. Her atrophied tongue swayed like a water plant between her deep blue lips. Already, there was no sign of her teeth. A single cry, little more than a moan, escaped from between those puckering pale-flecked lips. ' . . . water.'

I ran to the sink, turned the tap on all the way and filled the plastic washbowl until it overflowed. The water slapped at the sides with each of my hasty footsteps, sloshing onto the living room floor as I hurried back to the balcony. As soon as I splashed it onto my wife's chest, her entire body underwent a quivering revival, like the leaf of a huge plant. I went back and refilled the washbowl, returning to pour it over my wife's head. Her hair sprang up, as though some invisible weight had been compressing it. I watched her glittering green body bloom afresh with my baptism. I felt dizzy. My wife had never been so beautiful.

Part - 7

Mother. I'm not able to write you letters anymore. Or to wear the sweater you left here. That orange woollen sweater, the one you accidentally left behind when you came up to visit last winter. I wore it the day after he went on his business trip. You know how I feel the cold. It hadn't been washed, so it still had that smell of stale side dishes mixed in with the scent of your skin. On a different day I probably would have washed it, but it was too cold, and besides, I wanted to keep breathing in that scent, so I kept it on, and even fell asleep wearing it. The next morning, the frost still hadn't relaxed its grip, and perhaps it was because I was so cold and thirsty that, when the morning sunlight eventually shone through the bedroom window, that stifled cry broke out from me: mother. Wanting to be enfolded in that warm light, I went out onto the balcony and took off my clothes. The sun's rays penetrating my bared flesh were

so much like your scent, I knelt there and called out mother, mother. No other words.

I wonder how much time passed. Days, weeks, months? Having noticed that the air didn't seem particularly warm, all I registered after that was a slight rise in temperature, followed by a comparable dip. Any moment now, the windows of the distant flats over the Chungnang stream will blaze with an orange light. Can the people who live there see me? What about the cars that race along the main road, light streaming from their headlights? What do I look like now? He's been extremely kind. He bought a huge flowerpot and planted me in it. On Sundays, he spends all morning sitting on the balcony threshold catching aphids.

He, who used to be so exhausted all the time, climbs the mountain behind our block every morning, returning with a pail of mineral water to water my legs (he's remembered that I don't like tap water). A while ago, he emptied my flowerpot and replaced my soil with an armful of rich new loam. When the previous night's rain has scrubbed some of the dirt from the city air, he throws the front door and windows wide open to let the fresh air circulate. It's strange, mother. Even without seeing, listening, smelling and tasting, everything feels fresher, more alive. I sense the rough friction of the car tyres as they skim over the tarmac, the minute reverberations of his footsteps as he opens the front door and walks over to me, the rain-saturated air swelling with fertile dreams, the grey half-light of dawn.

I feel buds sprouting and petals unfurling in places both near and distant, larvae emerging from chrysalises, dogs and cats giving birth to their young, the trembling stop-start of the pulse of the old man in the next building, the spinach parboiling in a pan in the kitchen above, a bunch of snapped-off chrysanthemums being put in a vase beside the gramophone in the flat below. Day or night, the stars describe a calm parabola, and every time the sun rises the bodies of the sycamores at the side of the highway incline their craving bodies eastwards. My own body responds in a similar way. Can you understand? Soon, I know, even thought will be lost to me, but I'm alright. I've dreamed of this, of being able to live on nothing but wind, sunlight and water, for a long time now.

Thoughts of when I was young: when I ran into the kitchen and buried my face in your skirt, that delicious smell; the smell of sesame oil, of stir-fried sesame seeds. I always had my hands in the earth, you know. My soil-smeared hand dirtying the hem of your skirt. How old would I have been? That spring day hazed with drizzle, father lifting me up onto the power tiller and driving us down to the shore. The unconcerned laughter of adults in rainwear, children with wet hair plastered to their foreheads, skipping around and waving, their faces whirling, blurring. That poor village by the sea was your whole world. You were born there and grew up there. You gave birth there, worked there, grew old there.

At some point, you will be laid there at the foot of our family burial ground, side by side with father. It was fear of ending up like you, mother, that made me put such a distance between myself and my home. Leaving home at seventeen, the urban districts of Busan, Daegu, Gangneung, where I wandered aimlessly for over a month, have remained in my memory. Lying about my age at a Japanese restaurant, running errands alone, evenings curled up in a foetal position in the reading room- I liked that place. The dazzling lights of the urban districts, the glittering glamour of their inhabitants. I don't know when I first became aware that I would end up old and ruined, roaming these stranger-thronged streets. I was unhappy at home and equally unhappy elsewhere, so tell me, where should I have gone?

I've never been happy. Is there some tortured soul forever at my back, clutching at my throat, my limbs? I've only ever wanted to run away, an extremely basic impulse, the pain that provokes a cry, the pinch that produces a scream. Sitting with my knees up at the back of the bus, looking as though I wouldn't hurt a fly, and all that time longing to shatter the window with my fist. Greedy for the blood that would stream down my palm, I would have lapped it up as a cat does milk. What was it that I was trying to run away from, what was it that tormented me so much I longed to flee to the other side of the world? And what held me back, hobbling me, crippling me? What were the fetters that weighed me down, preventing the leap that would transfuse this sickening blood?

The elderly doctor repeatedly rapped the stethoscope with his finger, muttering that my insides were as silent as the grave. That the only sounds were the echoing gusts of a distant wind. He put the stethoscope down on the table and shifted the ultrasound monitor. I lay still as he smeared a clammy gel onto my stomach then rubbed a cold stick-shaped tool over my flesh, methodically travelling down from my solar plexus to my lower stomach. Through that tool, it seemed, an image of my insides was transmitted to the monitor, in black and white. 'It's normal,' he muttered, clicking his tongue. 'What we're looking at now is your intestines . . . there's nothing wrong with anything there.' Everything was declared 'normal'. 'Stomach, liver, uterus, kidneys, they're all fine.' Why couldn't he see that these organs were slowly atrophying, soon to disappear? I wiped most of the gel off with a handful of tissues, but when I tried to get up he told me to lie back down again. He pressed down on my stomach in a few different places; it wasn't particularly painful. I glared at his bespectacled face as he flung out a casual 'Does it hurt?', and kept shaking my head.

'Is it okay here?'

'It doesn't hurt here?'

'It doesn't hurt.'

I got an injection, and on the way home I vomited again. I crouched down in the subway station, back braced against the tiled wall. I counted as I waited for the pain to subside. The doctor had told me to relax, you see, to think cozy, calming thoughts. Everything is down to the mind, he'd said, intoning it like some Buddhist master. Calming thoughts, comfortable thoughts, one, two, three, four, endless peace, counting while trying not to throw up . . . the pain brought tears to my eyes, convulsions gripping me as I retched up stomach acid, again, again, until finally there was nothing left and I could let myself sink to the floor. I waited for the shaking ground to stop, damn it, just to stop. How long ago was that?

Mother, I keep having the same dream. I dream that I'm growing tall as a poplar. I pierce through the roof of the balcony and through that of the floor above, the fifteenth floor, the sixteenth floor, shooting up through concrete and reinforcing rods until I break through the roof at the very top. Flowers like white larvae wriggle into blossom at my tallest extremities. My trachea sucks up clear water, so taut it seems it will burst, my chest thrusts up to the sky and I strain to stretch out each branching limb. This I how I escape from this flat. Every night, mother, every night the same dream.

The days are growing colder. Today, too, this world will have seen many leaves fall to the ground, many snakes shed their skins, many insects shed their tiny lives, and many frogs begin their winter hibernation, a little ahead of time. I keep thinking of your sweater. The memory of your scent is no longer so clear. I want to ask him to drape it over me, but speech is lost to me now. What can I do? He cries to see me wasting away, and he gets angry, too. As you know, I was all the family he had. I can detect his warm tears mingling in the mineral water he pours on me. I can sense the air molecules being disarranged, his clenched fist flailing without a target. I'm scared, Mother. My limbs have to fall out. This flowerpot is too cramped, its walls too hard. Shooting pains at the tips of my roots. Mother, I will die before winter comes. And I doubt that I will bloom again in this world.

Part - 8

Later that night when I'd arrived back from my business trip, after dousing my wife with three washbowls full of water, she vomited a slew of yellow stomach acid. I watched her lips pucker and quickly knit themselves back together, flesh into flesh, before my very eyes. My trembling fingers fumbling at those pale-flecked lips, I at last heard a feeble voice, so faint I couldn't make out what it might be saying. That was the last time I heard my wife's voice. After that, there wasn't so much as a moan. A thick white spray of roots sprouted out of her inner thighs. Dark red flowers blossomed from her chest. Twin stamens, white at the ends, yellowish and thick at the roots, pierced out through her nipples. When her raised hands were still able to

exert a tiny amount of pressure, my wife wanted to clasp my neck. Looking into those eyes, in which a faint light still remained, I bent forwards into the embrace of those camellia-petal hands. 'Are you okay?' I asked. Her eyes, a pair of well-ripened grapes; glimmering on their lacquered surfaces, the ghost of a smile.

As autumn deepened, I witnessed a clear orange light gradually imbue my wife's body. When I opened the window, her upstretched arms would sway ever so slightly, moving with the wind currents. As autumn drew to a close, her leaves began to fall in twos and threes. Her body slowly changed from its former orange to an opaque brown. I thought about the last time I'd slept with my wife. Instead of the sour tang of bodily fluids, an unfamiliar, faintly sweet scent had been coming from my wife's lower half. At the time, I just assumed she must have changed to a different brand of soap, or else that she'd had a bit of time on her hands and chose to spend it in sprinkling some drops of perfume down there. How long ago was all that? Now, her form retains barely a trace of the biped she once was. Her pupils, which seemed to have metamorphosed into shining round grapes, are gradually being buried in brown stems. My wife cannot see anymore. She can't even flex the ends of the stems. But when I go out onto the balcony I feel a hazy sensation that defeats all language, like a minute electric current pulsing out from her body and into mine. When the leaves which were once my wife's hands and hair all fell out, and the place where her lips had meshed together split open, releasing a handful of fruit, that sensation ended like a thin thread snapping.

The tiny fruits had burst out en masse like pomegranates; I gathered them in my hands and sat down across the threshold that connects the balcony to the living room. These fruits, which I was seeing for the first time, were a yellowish green. And they were hard, like the sunflower seeds they serve alongside popcorn as an accompaniment to beer. I picked out one and popped it into my mouth. The smooth rind was entirely devoid of taste or smell. I crunched down on it. Fruit of the only woman I'd ever had on this earth. The first thing my palate picked up was an acidic, almost burning flavour, and the juice that clung to the root of my tongue had a solely bitter aftertaste. The next day I bought a dozen small, round flowerpots, and after filling them with fertile soil, planted the fruits in them. I lined the small flowerpots up next to that of my withered wife, and opened the window. I leant out over the railing and smoked a cigarette, savouring the smell of fresh grass that had suddenly bloomed from my wife's lower parts. The chill wind of late autumn ruffled my cigarette smoke, my long hair. When spring came, would my wife sprout again? Would her flowers bloom red? I just didn't know.

Translator's Note

Han Kang wrote this story in 1997, and it is in many ways a direct precursor to her 2007 novel *The Vegetarian* – in both, a married couple in their early thirties find their hitherto uneventful lives turned upside down when the woman starts to undergo a transformation. But while *The Vegetarian* eschews anything explicitly supernatural – Yeong-hye's desire to turn into a tree is seen by those around her as a symptom of mental illness, and there is nothing in the narrative itself to disprove this reading – the nameless protagonist of 'The Fruit of My Woman' really does become a plant: leaves, berries and all.

These metamorphoses are more akin to Kafka than Ovid in their allegorical relations with society. Korea has no comparable tradition of transformation, and Greek mythology has not been a major influence on its literature. Han Kang's works often strike me as retellings of myths for which no original exists, an interpretation that suits the seriousness Korean critics have dubbed her 'classicism' – diametrically opposed to the witty, light-hearted postmodernism in vogue when her writing debuted. The influence of Korean Buddhism, with its conception of violence as inherent in the human animal, seems apparent in Han's tendency to go deeper than specific societal inflections. *The Vegetarian* in particular melds the archetypal underpinnings of myth with the narrative strategies of modern prose fiction, gaining much of its power from the fine balance between the universality of these mythical archetypes and the specificity of its setting in contemporary South Korea, where social structures are such that pan-human violence manifests in men as danger to women, but in women as danger to themselves.

Where *The Vegetarian* borrows the sheer force of universals – violence, desire, art – 'The Fruit of My Woman' uses the same premise to offer a nuanced and multifaceted critique of its social setting. Though the husband is a far more sympathetic character than *The Vegetarian*'s Mr Cheong, he still reflects damaging gender norms, dismissing his wife's longing for a different life as romantic idealism, typically feminine, while taking pride in what he considers his own steady realism. Several of South Korea's leading female authors have examined the space of the apartment as a shaping factor for female domestic life – exploring the link between their country's industrialisation (rapid and relatively recent) and homogenisation, its capitalism (valorised as a part of national identity, in contrast to the communist North) and its conformity. Alongside this, 'The Fruit of My Woman' can also be read as part of the discourse of 'ecoambiguity' cutting across East Asian literatures in response to local and regional environmental crises. Nature in all its glorious fecundity is everywhere in this story, throwing into sharp relief both the sealed, sterile apartment space – and the couple's childlessness. It is in the language itself, the style of which is notably different from that of *The Vegetarian* – here longer, slightly more florid sentences unfurl like many-fronded leaves, freighted with similes

and other imagistic comparisons. As ever with Han's writing, it is a joyful challenge to render in translation, and one which I hope I've done justice to.

LxNotes