Books

Review: *The Liberators*

By E. J. Koh ’13SOA (Tin House).

By
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|
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E.J. Koh (Adam K. Glaser)

***The Liberators*,** the poetic first novel from E. J. Koh ’13SOA, opens with a widower, Yohan, longing to access his late wife’s wisdom. It is 1980 in Daejeon, South Korea, and after a coup d’état, the country is under the thumb of a US-backed military dictator. News of North Korean tunnels has South Korea feeling “contaminated with spies.” The army opens fire on students protesting martial law in Gwangju, killing hundreds. Amid the horror, Yohan thinks of his wife: “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 … I wanted to ask Namjo whether a country split in half was still a country.”

It’s a question that reverberates across *The Liberators* as Koh follows four generations of two families from Korea to California, tracing how decades of occupation, war, and division echo in the lives of individuals. Koh begins the story in 1980 but dips back to the years preceding the 1945 division of the Korean peninsula after thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule. The border, “an arbitrary line,” cleaved “a society which shared a culture and a language,” Koh writes. Reunification remains illusory; the Korean War is ongoing, paused by armistice. Narrated in short chapters from the shifting and split perspectives of a dozen characters, *The Liberators* grapples with what Korea’s rending has wrought in the lives of these families and those they touch.

At the center of this spiderweb of interconnected lives and histories is Yohan and Namjo’s daughter Insuk. A twenty-three-year-old idealist who wants to join the protests for democracy, Insuk is engaged to fellow university student Sungho, “a nihilist about country.” Not long after the engagement, Yohan is imprisoned under suspicion of harboring communist sentiments. Insuk and Sungho — already unhappy — wed in Sungho’s impoverished and overbearing mother’s basement apartment. Sungho soon leaves his wife, now pregnant, with his mother as he immigrates to San Jose, California, in hopes that his family will join him and establish a freer life there. By the time they arrive in 1983, Insuk has already given birth to their son, Henry. He grows up watching his grieving mother struggle to adjust to life in America; meanwhile he develops a tendency to stray far from home. The family has left Korea, but they have erected their own borders between one another.



Tin House

While *The Liberators* is Koh's first novel, her work spans genres, languages, and continents and is united by a lyrical tone and an unflinching approach to Korean history. Koh studied poetry and translation at Columbia and in 2017 published her first book, *A Lesser Love*, a collection of love poems and elegies grounded in the Korean concept of *jeong*, the deep bond between people, places, and things. She explored her own familial bonds and history in the 2020 memoir *The Magical Language of Others*, translating and reflecting on letters her mother sent her in the early 2000s from South Korea, where Koh's parents had returned for a job, leaving a teenage Koh and her older brother behind in Northern California. In reading these letters as an adult and researching how her family's past in Korea was marked by violence and destruction, Koh gained new empathy for her mother.

Koh’s turn to fiction has enabled her to revisit her family’s history through a more expansive — though no less intimate — lens. By splitting the narration between several voices, Koh juxtaposes competing views and memories, mining the tensions between personal and state narratives, love and war, paranoia and trust, borders and connections, captivity and liberation. And while the novel deals with historical episodes, from the 1948–49 Jeju Island massacre to the 1988 Seoul Olympics to the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit, the focus throughout is on how these events affect the characters. Most of the historical exposition comes from snippets of personal and political debates in San Jose’s Korean restaurants and pool halls.

Even as it maps dreams crushed by borders, *The Liberators* is ultimately about survival and love and reasons to hope for peace. As Insuk reminds her granddaughter toward the end of the novel, “The sun still shone upon the wreckage and the water, and upon everyone and everywhere in the world.”

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