



CRIMES AGAINST GROWTH

by Joseph Han

IT would have been too difficult for me to get the tree down to a stump. The area of the base had required more time, and since the poplar diverged into two trunks, it was easier to take them down separately. Here it stands at the height of two people, shaped into a wishbone—whatever you want to call it, a “Y” or a peace sign. At least, that’s how we’ve been taking photos, mocking the tree with our hands. It’s hard sometimes for me to see it now and think about how what’s left carried so much more. I wonder if it feels that phantom weight.



A fractured larynx. This happened years ago, but it could be the place to start. An example of many aggressions we looked for. I'm not even sure what that must have been like for Major Henderson. I heard he coughed up blood for a while afterward, but it looked more like froth from Coca-Cola poured too fast.

A dozen guards from the Korean People's Army attacked him right outside the truce conference room during an armistice commission meeting. Even the North Korean press helped the guards by surrounding Major Henderson, closing in while the guards grappled with him. I heard it's about trying to gain fame, especially if you have the courage to take down an American.

At some point Major Henderson fell into a coma between stomps. They drove their heels into his stomach and chest with such force, they could have been trying to find the concrete through his body, or force all the air right out of him, until there was nothing left between boot and the ground.

When I talked to the Army doctor about it, he told me the larynx is located at the top of the windpipe near the front of your neck. Even my own ROK troops asked me how he could have groaned in pain when he was unconscious. I told them they nearly crushed his voice box like an aluminum can, but no matter how much violence the body endures, it

carries sound while you're alive. In the most silent place, a slow pulse can sound like thunder, a reminder that the night hasn't won out just yet. That's what the Americans mean when they say they almost got the wind knocked out of them. That's all we're made of—the storms that move through us and keep our hearts waiting and alert.

The troops didn't say anything after that.



Just another routine trimming at guard post no. 3.

I told the cutter that to prune a tree, you need to imagine the shape of how it should look when you're finished. Consider the skeleton and remove broken branches from the spine. This way water can be distributed to areas that are already healthy and thriving. In terms of excess, you must remove branches that clutter, so light and air may circulate to all parts.

But since we were more concerned about the poplar blocking our view of the North Korean guard posts, none of this mattered. The poplar stood as something in between. We would take down just enough to see. I considered it a quick buzz cut.



Operation Paul Bunyan, in order to be swift and successful, needed to take necessary measures to ensure the safety of our men in the face of any escalation. We sent our gunships on a route between the Imjin River and the DMZ, along with helicopters carrying a rifle company to provide additional support. The North Koreans watched us from the west end of the Bridge of No Return, fingers wrapped around handles, tapping. No use in negotiating when bullets become syllables.

We all stood around, waiting for someone to utter the first word.

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“Around 10:45 a.m. today, fourteen American imperialists carrying axes walked into the Joint Security Area to cut down trees without prior consent from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Four of our comrades went to where the aggressors worked and offered them a brief warning about the ramifications of continuing without our consent, to which these hoodlums responded by barbarically attacking our guards, beating them with weapons and using their numbers to their advantage to commit such a serious and provocative act. Our comrades had no choice but to resort to self-defense and summon their courage in the face of these odds.

Citizens, we have received word from Great Leader Kim Il-Sung that our comrades in the Korea People's Army, with the flame of *juche* burning in their hearts, has mobilized into combat readiness for when a new war is at hand. Remember, the United States has always been ready. Have we not seen already their willingness to use nuclear power against our once colonizers and neighbors? This is why they have occupied the south and installed a puppet regime. This is yet another part of the American campaign to exert their dominance beyond their own lands. Fear not citizens, as we will not allow this fight to extend into a third world war."

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We took apart limbs first and threw them on the side of the road to collect and haul out later. Having the convoy of Task Force Vierra behind us didn't make the job any easier. It was easy enough drawing the line with the initial cut. I wanted to get this done myself. Slicing through a column of clay with a thread could have been a faster process. The chainsaw vibrated through my hands and in between the places where my bones met, all the way down into my knees, so that even the truck bed I stood on shook.

Chips of bark sprayed into a curve, as if the poplar burst a leak, a rain of sparks. If I applied too much pressure, the chainsaw would overheat

and jam. I thought I could've started a fire with all that smoke drifting from my knuckles.

We must've gone through thirteen of them. Some would say it's the chainsaw making all that noise but that's just not true. On its own, it just rumbles as a sibling to the motorcycle. All those rings account for years, so when I cut through them, it's like what they say, your life flashes before you, except you start from the moment when you're getting hurt and reverse time. The poplar screeched as I reached each layer, knowing I would find its beginning, when it was just a stem waiting to ripple in width and stretch its back into something fuller and permanent.

Half of the poplar fell. I heard sheets of glass shatter, branches thunder, and then creak, until there was only the sway of a hundred green fans.

When I got through the first trunk, it dripped sap and glistened like a large cherry cut in half, staining my gloves maroon. We all look the same inside. I lifted my head in exhaustion, tonguing the specks of wood on my lips and in the corners of my mouth. The trunk became a narrow path into a sky full of leaves.



“The United Nations Command views this brutal act with the utmost concern and warns that such outburst of belligerence and violence cannot be tolerated, while North Korea must bear full responsibility for its actions.”



They stepped off a truck with crowbars, pick handles, and axes.

When the KPA soldier ran toward me, I stared at his teeth more than the axe head slung over his shoulder as I shuffled backward. He screamed, saliva dripping down his chin, and I thought he would tear out my neck by biting me if he lost control of the axe.

It would have been better to anticipate his swing, rather than to turn around and run. A blow to the side of my knees or calf would be enough to topple me over, leaving me to turn around and offer my forearms above my head, so he could hack them first before meeting my skull.

I imagined the last sound I would hear—the crunch of a kitchen knife invading ripe watermelon rind.

I threw my hat at his face to distract him. Maybe I had to take off my uniform to make the point that we were the same. With a look, I tried to remind him we were both Korean. He charged again but I tackled him by

the waist. He dropped the axe behind my back. After mounting him, I swung at his face over and over again, though his cheeks felt like stones.

Because I tried to tell you, I kept trying to tell you, and if this was what you wanted, I'll make sure you don't look like a brother to me.

The hard clapping noises from my hands matched drumbeats. Someone pulled me off and more of their men started beating me instead. I shielded my face. I tucked my chin into my chest so I could hide my throat. They wanted to change me too and make me a member of this silent and growing family of pulp and bruise.

My forearms and ribs rang like metal pipes, this pain creating awful music throughout my body. I turned my head some and saw Captain Bonifas lying on the ground, as if he was sound asleep. A KPA guard stood over Lieutenant Barret and pulled out a handle with both of his hands, reversing the motion with the same force that he had probably used to bring it into his chest. One of the UNC officers drove a truck over Captain Bonifas' body to scare away the ROK guards, and the men around me stopped. They paused for a second after raising their elbows and then dropped their weapons, which danced around my body. My fists hummed.

Invisible strikes resounded notes inside me. Echoes bounced like flies in a jar called Panmunjom.



So many pieces to carry away, each one never existing in a separate size.

There was no precision to our cutting. We had been more careful when we first trimmed. How easy it is to erase what's there in your reach, no evidence of what's been taken until you climb down. The dust back to the ground from which we came, just like the American chaplain said. From what I heard about him, Bunyan's ox could have taken all of it.

Each leaf had only known wind. Feathers to wings.



At first, Lieutenant Pak Chol and his guards just stood around in a line and watched, their arms crossed. It was silent besides leaves rattling with every cut, the axe working like a hand on the clock.

I tried to keep my attention on the workers standing on the ladder. To think my first concern had been whether it was secure enough so it wouldn't slip and fall. I didn't want to glance at Lieutenant Chol. There's a reason why the Americans called him "Bulldog." Always known to instigate trouble with his hostility and brash attitude. What bothered me the most, though, was how he didn't once say a thing.

“Stop cutting,” one of the guards said, stepping forward from the line. By now, they had been watching us proceed for about ten minutes without complaint.

We all looked at the guard, and I translated quickly in a whisper to Lieutenant Barret. Except Captain Bonifas, who kept his back turned to the guards, and Bulldog, to keep supervising.

“There will be problems if you cut more branches,” the guard said.

“We are not violating any protocol or jurisdiction in the Joint Security Area,” I said.

“You cannot continue this trimming. Kim Il-Sung planted this very tree with his own hands, nourishing it with his care until it has fully grown.” The guard kept pointing at the poplar to remind us which tree he was talking about. “Our Great Leader, until today, has been watching over its health. You did not ask for our approval in this matter.”

Our workers awaited further instruction.

“What’s he going on about now?” Lieutenant Barret said.

“Well...”

Captain Bonifas lifted his hand. “No need to explain,” he said, moving his hand back to his armpit. “Keep pruning.”

It didn't take much longer until the truck arrived. Bulldog frowned in disapproval as we continued. He took off his watch and placed it in a handkerchief he pulled out of his pocket. He started rolling up his sleeves.

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I'm not responsible for taking it down.

I'd like to think that it was always there, since the beginning.

I didn't make the first nick.

What bothers me most: go back a little further and there would be no routine. It never chose to be in the middle.

When I look at the tree now, at this altar, I picture an outline as I build its height until I'm just staring at a blank sky, squinting toward visions of a god until I can't anymore.

I close my eyes against the sun and imagine the blood red behind my eyelids darkening, cooling, under the shade of a time I won't know again—when the poplar was just there as a singular being, blocking no one's way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Han was born in Seoul, South Korea and raised in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. He is the author of *Uncrossable: stories* (YesYes Books, forthcoming September 2019), and a poetry collection, *Bloodletting* (The Operating System, forthcoming 2020). His fiction, poetry, and nonfiction have appeared in *Kartika Review*, *wildness*, *The Margins*, and *Entropy*, and he is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa, where he teaches creative writing and composition.

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