

*Inmyeonjo*

*(a bird with a human face // a sacred creature that connects the sky to the land)*

The people in our village, like most, were superstitious. Our day-to-day lives were uneventful, following as they did the patterns of the seasons, the harvests. We fixed all our fantasy on one figure, a woman who lived alone in a house on the ridge of the hill that bordered the village to the North. The house was small, made of wood with a plaited roof of rice straw. The back of it faced the hill; in this way it was sheltered from the winds that came so viciously each winter. This was one of the reasons the rest of us envied this house – the other was the floods. By the end of June, the rest of us would find ourselves with sodden possessions, or possessions completely washed away, damaged crops, and injured or dead livestock. The smell of damp wood would last long into autumn. It was not fair, we thought – the house on the hill was never touched, not by water or wind.

But the house had been there for as long as anyone could remember, and so had its inhabitant, so we did not question it. As for her – we called her Saewa Yeoja behind her back, and nothing to her face for she rarely came down from her perch. No one knew her proper name; she was the Lady with the Birds. It was more than just the geese that flocked to her door, more than the Loons that nested amidst her roof in the winter, the white Cranes with their heads drooping low, or the Pheasants who lingered around her poorly-kept garden no matter the time of year. There was a local legend about Saewa Yeoja, fueled by her uncanny appearance – she never seemed to age. My mother remembered seeing her when she herself was a girl, walking towards the hill, bent under the weight of a bundle of firewood. She looked like a little old lady, my mother said, until she turned around and I saw her face which was so smooth and beautiful that I was stopped in my tracks.

The legend went like this: When Saewa Yeoja was a girl, she fell in love with a young soldier (a predictable beginning). The soldier went to fight in the Chongyu War and was mortally wounded. At the moment of his death, Saewa Yeoja felt her grief so profoundly that she transformed into a swan, and flew across the land to find her lover on the battlefield, and to lay across his chest as he died. Once he was dead she flew back, and transformed back into a girl. But, her transformation back was never complete – her soul remained that of a swan. From that day on, she never spoke again, nor did she age. She was frozen in time – half woman, half swan, doomed to live forever in that little house on the hill with only her fellow birds for company.

A silly story, I know. But over time a belief had developed that Saewa Yeoja, being half-bird, half-woman, had the power to curse you, and that if this happened you would meet a bloody death, like her lover. I didn't believe any of it, but hearing it again and again, I couldn't help but start to feel sad for her. She must be lonely up there, I thought. I made up my mind to befriend her.

I made the ascent up the steep, slippery hill on a damp, late winter morning, clutching a basket of pears. It was hard going up the hill and my breath came fast and heavy by the time I reached the ridge. Up close, the house looked even more unkept. My arrival upset a group of pigeons, who burst into noisy flight, causing me to leap back and nearly drop the basket of pears. I noticed that the front door hung open a crack. Hello? I called as I approached, but my voice was carried away by the wind. Pushing the door open, I stepped carefully across the threshold of the house. The floor felt spongy beneath my feet. It was dark, so I opened the door all the way to let the light in.

I nearly cried out in shock.

The floor of the narrow hallway was completely covered in a thick cushion of feathers. Feathers stuck to the walls, the ceiling. They began to swirl in the wind from outside. Feathers of every colour – white, soft grey, glittering blue, emerald, black. They swirled faster and faster,

surrounding my body. I staggered backwards, dropping the basket of pears. My heel caught on the doorstep and I tumbled backwards, landing hard on my back, narrowly avoiding hitting my head against the sodden ground. I pushed myself into a seat.

The door was wide open, the feathers swirling faster and faster, moving with unnatural force, gaining momentum. I was afraid, but I stayed still, waiting for ... something, something I didn't yet know.

Slowly, so slowly that at first I thought it was a trick of the light, a shape began to take form amidst the whirling feathers.

It was the face of Saewa Yeoja – young and beautiful as I had imagined. In her eyes was a look of strange anticipation, as if something she had long awaited was finally coming to pass. Out of the feathers, her hand emerged, palm up. I no longer felt afraid. I felt, strangely, calm. She smiled at me.

I'm sorry, I heard myself say, I'm sorry it's taken me so long.

I reached out and took her hand. Even though the feathers continued to move, still faster and faster, they made no sound at all. Effortlessly, I was pulled to my feet. Her form, the feathers, began to move backwards into the house. Still holding her hand, I followed.

*The end.*