

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.

We told each other stories about the future. My sister was older, so her stories were more focused on plentiful food, income, and shelter. She dreamt of warmth, of smooth marble floors and beds you could sink into like a character in a fairy tale – sink into and never come out, she said, sometimes. I was younger, though I understood how much pain that the world could hold – but, I thought, surely it could hold just as much freedom. That was the word I settled on: freedom. I cared less about things (now, I see that it was precisely my sister’s attention to our material reality that allowed me to consider things like freedom).

In the future, I told her, I will have travelled to the farthest corners of the world. I will have seen the seas from every angle, and climbed up mountains, mountains I don’t even know the names of yet. I’ll return with riches—

How will you get them? She asked. I shrugged at her. Well, she said, you have to think of how you get them, otherwise it’s not good storytelling. Also, maybe you should think of some of the names of the mountains, and other places you visit, because stories should be specific. Being specific makes them feel real.

I don’t know that many names of mountains, I told her, only Everest. And I don’t want to climb Everest, that’s too high.

You should find an encyclopedia, she said. Then you can learn some names of other places, and what they are like.

I don’t have money for an encyclopedia, I said.

Go to the library, she said. But the library had been boarded up a long time ago.

So I just thought of the stories to myself. Of course now I see that my sister was just trying to educate me, in her way, but at the time her demands of specificity made me feel insufficient, so I told them to myself, thinking about them as I tried to sleep, or when I was walking somewhere or performing some other mindless task.

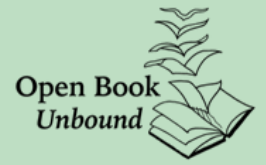
They felt real to me, specific or not. I imagined the salty smell of the sea, the sun hanging low over the vast grey-blue, burning bright orange before disappearing. I imagined climbing to the top of a mountain and finding soft green grass at the top, scattered with colourful wildflowers, the sweet scent of them in the air. I imagined standing at the very top of the mountain and looking down, into the land that dipped gently into meadows, lakes. I imagined feeling tired, tired deep in my bones, from climbing, but then being rejuvenated by the fresh, cold air. I didn't know how accurate any of these images were. They were composites – things I had been told by others, things I had seen in books, things that appeared to me in my dreams.

I knew that dreams weren't real, but in them everything felt so vivid, so colourful and clear that I couldn't believe that they didn't exist, somewhere. I felt bad, that my sister couldn't see these things too, these beautiful places that didn't have names.

I made up another story for her, and told her over breakfast: In the future, I said, I will travel to the farthest reaches of the earth. I will see deserts, oceans, islands, jungles. And I will come back, and bring back to you the names of all of these places, and tell you them all – names overflowing from my lips landing at your feet, names like jewels.

JESSICA WIDNER

THE PALE MORNING



WRITER IN RESIDENCE

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The ancient Greeks had no word for blue; Homer described the sea as “wine-like”. Colour was not about hue, but about the refractions of light.

When we take into account this experience, this being, this life, it would do us well to return to the simplest things – the moments of sense, captured in the net of our perception. Or the moments of collision with others, all the loss, the misunderstanding, but how important they are – those touches, that echo across years.

Near the end of his life, Guglielmo Marconi became convinced that sound never died. That with the right radio frequency, you would be able to hear every sound ever produced, throughout history. He spoke particularly of the Sermon on the Mount, of Caesar, of Shakespeare. The hypothesis was proven wrong – sound does die, eventually.

This is what Joaquin was thinking of when he walked to the beach that morning. But how marvellous it would be, he thought, if Marconi had been right. But it was marvellous enough to have just had that idea...

The sea was very pale that morning; it could not have been described as blue (*azul*). Perhaps the Greek, *polios* – ‘whitish’. The air was quite still that morning; the calls of the seabirds were louder than the waves. Already, the sand was hot under his feet. All these different ways of seeing, ways of hearing, he thought, and yet I can only have this one experience. If only he had more, more sense, more language, to describe these multitudes.

He was shocked from these thoughts by the realisation that he wasn’t alone on the beach. A woman sat, right where the sand was being washed wet and smooth by the waves. With her back to him, she appeared to be the exact image of his wife, who had now been dead for four years. He felt the jolt of shock first in his stomach, then it moved to his throat. He stopped, watched the wind moving through her hair. She sat very still, looking over the sea, her knees bent. Yes, there was nothing in her appearance to distinguish her from Alba. Her hair was the same shade, the sun

catching a glint of auburn amongst the dark brown. Her skin, her shoulders. Even the way she hunched forward a little reminded him of Alba's bad posture. He felt frightened, like he had stumbled into the past. It's true that him and Alba used to sit right there, on the cool sand, and watch the sea together.

Perhaps sensing that she was being watched, the woman turned her head to the right, her chin tilting up. From her profile, Joaquin could see that she had a completely different face to his wife. He let go of the breath he had been holding. The other similarities seemed to soften. He could see now that she was thinner than Alba, that her skin was whiter than Alba's. As if a spell had broken, he could now hardly see the resemblance that had, at first, been so arresting.

She had spotted him, and waved. She was a young woman, he saw now. He walked over to her. "Hello," she said.

"*Hola*," he said, "*buenos dias*."

"Oh, yes," she said, "*buenos dias*. It's a beautiful one, isn't it?" Joaquin smiled.

"Every day here it is beautiful," he said, embarrassed to find his English so unused, his accent so strong.

"I'm just visiting," she said, "Staying over there," she motioned down the beach.

He felt sad, suddenly. He wished she had not turned her head, that he could have lived in the illusion a little longer. This is my beach, he wanted to say, what are you doing here. But it wasn't her fault.

"May I sit with you, a little?" he asked. She nodded and he sat next to her, keeping a respectful distance.

Some time passed before she said, softly, "I am lonely too."

"*Lo sé*," he said.

They watched the sea together, lulled by the slow waves. The water was darkening now, *glaukos*, blue-grey, *azul grisáceo*. The sun rose slowly in the sky; he could feel the air becoming warmer around him, his skin dampening a little. Soon, he thought, soon he would go in and swim.

JESSICA WIDNER

THE HOUSE



WRITER IN RESIDENCE

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It took her several years after her father died to return to the house he had left her, in which she had grown up. She had moved far away from him as soon as she could. He had been cruel to her when she was very young; she could still remember him saying, to her mother, what an ugly little girl, how could anyone love such a thing? As she grew longer, lither, and her features settled into, if not beauty, then at least regularity, he softened towards her. There were no more insults; a general indifference, however, remained. She could not remember ever having a meaningful conversation with the old man. Her mother had left them both when she was ten years old – at the time she had blamed him. Now that she was an adult, she understood that it was her mother who had been truly cruel. What had she done when her father said those things to her? She had laughed. She had left her with him. Certainly, she thought, most families bring more life into this world – children, grandchildren, and on and on. Her family, it seemed, had just receded further and further away from life, shrinking into itself, leaving her, alone in a big old house.

She went back because she had to – it was cluttered with things, her solicitor said, and some of them were precious, but some were junk. The house, and its contents, weighed on her heavier and heavier with each passing year.

Some heartbreak helped her along. She needed a break from the city anyway. She drove up on a Sunday morning, slowly, on icy roads. As she approached the house she began to feel uneasy. What a strange, solitary childhood. She had tried hard to forget it.

She parked in the garage. The solicitor had had the place cleaned a couple of days before she arrived – otherwise, he had said, the dust would overwhelm her. She entered through the garage door, into the kitchen. She used to sit there, at the little wooden chair in the corner, and read, because it was the warmest, and the brightest, room in the house. She walked through it now, into the hallway, feeling the drop in temperature. It had always been a cold place, poorly insulated, with high ceilings and single-glazed windows. It smelled the same as it ever had – musty.

Her solicitor had been right. The place was cluttered, far more so than she had remembered. She moved through it slowly, taking everything in – the many rooms, their secret compartments, the taxidermy animals, shelves and shelves of books, more than anyone could read in a lifetime, the worn furniture, dark wood floors, the lack of mirrors. She looked out of one of the windows at the overgrown garden, bordered by frost-covered rosebushes. She felt sad then, thinking of her father, alone in the house for so many years.

She stayed longer than she thought she would. Not necessarily because she enjoyed the work, the slow and tedious cataloguing of the house's contents. But because, after the first night, she found herself being visited by her father. She could tell it was him from the way the air in the room changed. She would be in bed, bundled up against the cold air of the house, that the feeble radiators couldn't manage to cut through. But then, she would feel the air become warm, almost humid, and there would be the smell of cigar smoke. She knew, right away, that it was him. She didn't feel frightened. She just lay there, her eyes shut, immobile. It happened the next night, and the next, and so on, and it was always the same – a change in temperature, unmistakable, and the acrid scent of smoke.

Once she was used to these encounters she started speaking to him. She would tell him hello, or even say, Father, I'm sorry that I left you here all alone, but we just couldn't relate to each other. Or, Father, I should have tried harder. Or, if she was in a certain kind of mood, Father, you should have been better to me. You shouldn't have said those nasty things about me, you should have loved me in the way that daughters are meant to be loved.

Night after night she waited for a reply that never came. Sometimes, she felt a sensation like the air was settling even closer around her. Sometimes she felt so certain that he was about to speak, that she would hear his voice, the voice she had only ever heard over the last five years crackling at the other end of a telephone line. She began to think of him more during the day, to regret all the things she hadn't asked him when he was alive. At night, she asked, did you really think I was an ugly little thing? Did you ever love me? What happened between you and mother? Why did she leave? Why did she leave me?

Time passed, and though he still visited her in the night she grew accustomed to his silence. She stopped speaking to him. Soon she found herself sleeping through the night, not even noticing whether or not the air changed, not noticing the smell of smoke. She continued to tend to the house – she got rid of everything she didn't want, repainted the walls in brighter colours, replaced the dark upholstery. By the time spring came the place had begun to look cheerful. The musty smell had gone, and the first of the flowers began to bloom in the garden. She had not planned to stay so long, but it became harder to leave. The solicitor telephoned – are you thinking of selling soon? She would always say, no, there are still these things to do...

It happened slowly, the realisation that she would not sell, that the house belonged to her now, just as much as she belonged to it.