

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.

It was early in the day; the gallery was nearly empty when she went in, the sun through the window dazzling. There was one other person in the main room, an older woman, walking slowly between the paintings, sometimes going back to look again. Claire just wanted the quiet. The main piece of the exhibition was huge, a clashing, tangled jumble of pinks and reds, violent against the white wall. She sat in front of it on a cushioned bench.

She looked at it. She *watched* it. It had seemed ugly at first, the gleam of the paint, the inarticulacy of the shapes. Red and pink like raw meat. As time passed though, it started to soften, the initial harshness giving way to lushness. How soft and pretty the pink was, how velvety. How beautiful the strong sloping lines, the way the gleaming shapes seemed about to burst. The jewel-like reds. Empty your mind, just watch, watch this painting that is opening now, opening slowly like an entrance to another world.

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What would she do? The choice was upon her, hovering at the edges of her mind, a darkening cloud, a buzzing. *Tz, tz, tz*. Think of your body, melting against the bench, spilling over it like these shapes, these bright, melting shapes. A couple entered the room, hand in hand. They walked quickly from painting to painting, only slowing when they stopped to kiss, to speak to each other with their faces close together. What did it feel like? She couldn't remember. They were smiling at each other, not looking at the art. She couldn't remember. The pink melting shapes. How long it had been.

She loved the gallery, the quality of the air. His studio was better – she missed it there, the hush, chemical smell, incense. We take too many breaks, she said. He smoked; she didn't. She didn't like that he smoked, didn't like the smell, didn't like the way he looked when he did it. *If you don't make the choice, it will be made for you*. When she saw the painting he had done of her she had to look away. Look, he said, I made you look beautiful, just like you are. It wasn't that, it

was that she hadn't seen herself through someone else's eyes before. Is that me? Is that really me? He stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. Warm, the scent of acrylic and, underneath, there he was. She looked.

The couple passed into the next room, she got up and followed a little behind them. In the next room, the colours cooled – greens, dusty browns, one canvas just a washed out grey. That one, maybe; she needed more quiet, more space. He was so far away; her painting was so far away. In this city, everything held her tightly. How could she leave like this, into the blue unknown. The wild blue. *A sea-change, something rich and strange.* The grey made her feel nothing at all. Her mind like paper, blank and starched. She needed blue, she needed violet, she needed them bleeding into one another. She walked through the room, and up the staircase where she found what she was looking for, in the darkened room a film playing, two little girls playing in a garden, running through the sprinklers, eating popsicles, laughing, but everything saturated in a dark blue hue. There was the woman from before, sitting alone in the back, her jaw slackening, eyes beginning to close, head tilting back. Claire sat at the other corner of the room. How cool and dark it was, not like the white rooms below, the sun melting those great big paintings. The laughter of the girls played through the speaker, the splash of water, rustle of the grass, looping, looping. Small, dark space. The other woman started awake, looking around wildly for a moment before making eye contact with Claire. Then, she smiled, laughed a little, and Claire smiled back at her. She got up, left the room, left Claire alone. This little dark space, just for her. Too cold though; her skin raised in gooseflesh.

The choice was between expansion or contraction. Opening your life to someone else, to a new reality, new possibilities that she could not yet imagine. Becoming made new. The wild blue. The laughter of the girls began to grate on her. She got up, moved into the next room, which had no people in it. She had always liked the containment of being on her own. The neatly defined borders. This room was filled with sculptures made of jagged wire, metal, bits of mirrored glass. Some hung from the ceiling, rusted birds of prey. She walked among them. There was very little space; she moved slowly, afraid her clothes would catch, her skin, even. A serrated maze. On the

wall: “Do Not Touch/Proceed With Caution”. On the other wall: “WILD BIRDS”. Wild, sharp things. The light reflected off the glass, the effect sinister. They needed some softness. His hands on her shoulders, warm. Her gaze back at her in the painting, liquid, and the way he painted her lips parted, as if she were about to speak. Once she looked she couldn’t look away, she wanted to reach out and touch the canvas. It seemed that it moved, that it had a heartbeat. Do I really look like that? The colours of her eyes, her skin, her hair. And his hands on her shoulders, his head tilting downwards, his breath against her skin, so little space between their bodies. There I am.

She caught her eye in one of the mirrors and stopped. Oh, it was easy in the end. The answer was right there. She could have laughed out loud. Light, she walked back down the stairs and out of the gallery, into the air that was being warmed by the sun, and the lane bordered by trees, their spring buds just beginning to come.

It was the year of picnics.

Simple at first – we started with crisps and tins of beer, sitting on an old quilt my mother had made for me. The grass was a little damp; I was underdressed. We huddled close to each other for warmth, trying to speak about normal things, like nothing was wrong.

Then the weather turned. It was sunny and still. This time we put more of an effort in – you made sandwiches, cucumber and cream cheese on soft white bread, cut into triangles. Just like when I was a kid, you said, and I always liked the crusts on. I brought a tub of strawberries, which were small and sweet. After we ate we lay in the sun and everything felt suddenly possible again.

It became hotter. Under an uninterrupted blue sky we put paper plates out and I scooped tabouleh onto them. We ate it with pita bread and creamy hummus that you had made from scratch. It tastes so much better than what you get at the store, I said. You were proud of yourself. We opened a bottle of crémant and it fizzed over the sides of the bottle. We drank out of plastic cups. Apples, we said, it tastes like apples.

Even as the weather cooled it remained dry out. We decided we'd do one last picnic, before it got too cold and rainy. But we have to go all out this time, you said. I looked up “classic picnic food” and turned up with grilled chicken legs slathered in barbeque sauce, and potato salad. You made a cake – vanilla sponge with buttercream icing. There were edible flowers on the top; it looked beautiful, too beautiful to eat. I didn't know you were so good at baking, I said. You laughed and said, I've gotten good. There was so much cake left over that we had to give some away to some other people, who were also trying to catch the last of the bearable weather.

After that last picnic, things changed. We both became busy again. It seemed unimaginable that we'd had all that time to sit outdoors and do nothing. It began to feel almost like it hadn't happened at all. We lost touch a little – it was natural. Texts here and there. When the weather started getting warm again, I found myself thinking more and more about those picnics. I realised what I missed more than anything were the times we found ourselves in an easy silence, sitting and looking out at the other people who were sitting like we were, or the people playing football or frisbee, the older couples making their slow circuits around the park, dogs running past us. All around us other people living their lives, creating their own little worlds, and there we were, in the little world we had created, so happy just with the simple fact of being in each other's presence, of being outside, of being together and having nowhere to be and nothing to do.

Finally I messaged you: *Picnic?* You replied quickly, *I thought you'd never ask!* I felt strange going to meet you, worried somehow that it wouldn't be the same. I turned up with my quilt in hand and a container of samosas I'd bought at the grocery store. You were there waiting for me and when you saw me your face split into a wide smile. We hugged, I lay the quilt out and we sat down. I brought watermelon, you said. It wasn't quite warm enough yet, but neither of us said anything about it. We talked and talked, catching up on all the things that had happened since we had last seen each other. And, after we had eaten, we sat back, propping ourselves up on our elbows and watched two Labradors playing nearby.

Look at them, you said, they're so happy. They've got no concept of time.

If that was happiness, I felt happy then, truly happy, if only for a little while.

Before she lost her voice, she was a singer.

It happened one morning. She woke up and felt no different except that, a small thing she only thought of later, the light coming through the window seemed brighter than usual, more saturated in colour – a golden light. *What a beautiful morning*, she thought and, *how warm it is in here*. She liked the early hours of the morning, especially in the springtime. She never had anywhere to be before the afternoon, so she could be as leisurely as she wanted, getting up when she liked, taking her time to shower and dress, to wander about the flat, to make tea, breakfast, to read magazines. Her “goldfish hours”, she called this time, when she could exist without much of a thought in her mind.

Because of this routine, many hours passed without her even trying to speak to anyone. She listened to the radio – they played music from Satie’s Parade. She made hard-boiled eggs and toast and ate while reading a story about a man who decides to swim through every pool in his neighbourhood. It had a sad ending, but the feeling didn’t linger. She moved on to an article about jockeys. Outside her window, the trees seemed lush and greener than usual. She got up and opened the window, tilting her head back for a moment under the heat of the sun.

Often, she would sing in the shower. She didn’t that morning. This wasn’t particularly unusual; she thought nothing of it. After her shower she sat outside on her balcony in her silk bathrobe, letting her hair dry in the sun. Below her were the sounds of morning – cars, the voices of children on the way to school, a dog barking. The sound of the radio floated through the open door. They were playing popular music now: *Baby, baby, where did our love go?* She tried to hum along but no sound came. She tried harder, still nothing. Like it was stuck in her throat. She cleared her throat and tried again. She stood up and went back into the house and tried to say the words out loud: *Baby, baby, baby don’t leave me*. They didn’t come. Her lips couldn’t even form them, even as her brain sounded them out, her mouth stayed motionless. *What is happening?* Still, nothing.

She was nothing if not efficient. She got dressed, put make-up on and gathered her things, including a small notepad and pen. On the subway to her doctor's office, she wrote on the notepad: *I have lost my voice*. And then, a few stops later, she added: *I don't know why*. She willed herself to remain calm, during the subway ride and then after, as she ascended to the loud, busy street and walked the three blocks to the doctor's office. She chose to take the stairs instead of the elevator – she didn't like confined spaces. By the time she reached the fourth floor she was a little out of breath. Her breath, at least, still had sound. The office was quiet; the only people in the waiting room were a young woman reading a magazine, and her son, doing a puzzle on the floor. The radio was playing – the weather report. Another day of glorious sun but expect rain tomorrow. The song was stuck in her head, *baby baby baby*.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist said loudly. She realized she had just been standing in the doorway and strode forward, handing the notepad to the receptionist who read it and then gave her a sympathetic look. “Alright my dear,” she said, “If you can just write your name down for me and I'll get you the doctor as soon as possible.”

She wrote down her name, then sat and waited. Maybe her voice would reappear as soon as she saw the doctor. She would gladly take that small embarrassment over this experience being prolonged.

It was a doctor she had not seen before, a sleek, grey-haired man who motioned for her to sit on his exam table as if he too had lost his voice. She wrote for him: *it happened this morning. Yesterday I was fine. Nothing unusual has happened*. While she wrote he watched her patiently, his brow creased.

“Let me have a look at your throat,” he said, finally. He had a deep voice, a little hoarse. A smoker, perhaps. She opened her mouth wide and he shone a light in it. After a minute or so he said, “You can shut your mouth. Your throat looks fine, healthy, in fact.” She shook her head and wrote again:

I cannot get the words out at all. I cannot even move my mouth.

“Let me take your blood pressure,” he said. She pulled up her sleeve; the cuff was cold against her skin. His fingers grazed her as he fastened it.

They continued like this – him running tests, her knowing that it was useless. By the end of it all she was nearly in tears. *I am a singer*, she wrote, *that is my profession.*

“I am afraid I don’t know what it could be,” he said, “You seem in perfect health. The only thing I can think of is that it could be psychosomatic.”

What can I do?

“I would suggest some rest and relaxation.”

Over the next few weeks, she tried everything. Hypnosis, acupuncture, sensory deprivation, electroshock therapy, hallucinogens. She went to the club she performed at with her notepad and explained what had happened. They sent her away with a week’s wages. She wrote to her mother who sent her a cheque and said she would pray for her. Prayer was one thing she hadn’t yet considered. A couple of her friends came and visited but she felt embarrassed to be around them. Mostly, she lay in bed.

One morning, she woke to the sunshine coming through the window and remembered that first morning. How beautiful the light had seemed, how bright and rich. Was it like that again now? She couldn’t tell. She ran her hands across the bedsheets, feeling the soft material. She got up and brushed her teeth, washed her face. She sat at her kitchen table and wrote in her journal, something she had lately started doing. She wrote *I cannot keep going like this*. Her stomach rumbled. She got up and looked in her cupboards, her fridge, but couldn’t find anything. She would have to go out into the world. She showered, dressed, even styled her hair.

Outside everything was bright, noisy, crowded. But it was pleasant also – the air felt fresh and clean. She bought bread, eggs, and butter. On the way home she passed a shop that sold art supplies. In the window was a canvas with a landscape painted on it, a pond with a weeping willow next to it, the sky above blue and clear. She went inside. The scent of acrylics seemed familiar to her, even though she had never been in that shop before. She picked up a couple of sheets of canvas, a set of acrylic paints, some brushes, a wooden easel. It was too much for her to carry really, but she didn't have far to go.

Once she had laid everything out in the apartment she sat in the sunlight and shut her eyes. She thought of that morning, the golden light through the window, and how it had felt before she'd lost her voice. She thought of how the breeze had felt through the window, of the story she had read, the music she had listened to. She thought further back – to falling asleep the night before, coming home late from the club, tired and a little drunk, her throat a little tender, but not sore. Her limbs heavy, falling into bed under the silver light of the moon. She thought of the smoke-dimmed lights in the club. She didn't know how to paint, she had never done it before. But she decided she would try to find those lights, the silver and the gold.

She began to mix her paints. She would find them, no matter how long it took.

But what is wrong, with saying such a thing as *I don't want to work*?

I can only write when I'm trapped, he told you. What do you mean? Well, he said, like on a train or a plane. If there's nowhere else to go. Physically trapped.

There are some kinds of work you can understand. When you were a teenager you worked summers at a horse farm. You were promised lots of riding but in reality it was a lot of gardening. Looking back, it wasn't so bad. You pulled the weeds, swept them, and then they were gone. You haven't ever slept as deeply at night as you did, then.

Oh, he said, so you mean work as in *labour*? But there are different kinds of labour. You said that reading and writing didn't feel like pulling weeds. It lacked, you know, that sweet soreness, that deep rest after. I don't know, he said, it does make me hungry. By your distinction, he continued, work must be something you don't want to do. Certainly, you told him, otherwise it would be called *play*.

The road stretched out before you. It was getting darker outside, dusky, and your eyes felt heavy. There were dead bugs stuck to the windshield, flecks of grey; you hadn't noticed them before. Is this work, he asked, the driving? You pulled the handle and fluid spread thickly across the window, soon washed clean by the windshield wipers. It's starting to feel like it, you said. This is play, he said, remember what we've got waiting for us at the end.

It's something in between, you said quietly, the interminable journey from work to play.

You were both quiet for a while. The interminable journey from work to play. It stretched out like the road, with nothing visible below the horizon, or above. And yet, and yet ... a promised destination. He fiddled with the radio, moving between a traffic report to country music.

A lot of the time I don't want to write, you told him. Also I get paid for it, so I guess by that definition it is work. You're lucky, he said, or would you rather be pulling weeds? You shrugged. You wouldn't mind a garden. In the city the two of you lived in a flat like a small box, filled with all the things you had accumulated over the years, things you couldn't get rid of. Furniture, plants, food, clothes, toiletries. Once you tried growing tomatoes out of a window box, but the

squirrels got in and ate all the seeds. You'd left the window open too, so when you came into the living room in the morning and saw the table covered with soil you thought you were hallucinating. You'd stared up at the ceiling for a long time, wondering where the dirt had come from. The thing is, you hadn't been disturbed to see it there. It had felt like some kind of blessing.

You were going to the farm that your friends moved to a couple of years ago. At first they had split their time between the city and the farm, but now they'd had a baby and she just lived on the farm. He was a musician and toured a lot. What about what she did, he asked you, surely that was work? I don't know, you said, and then quickly, not that being a mother isn't hard work. What we need is a distinction, between *Work* with a capital-W and work as in, I've got to do some work around the house. A non-hierarchical distinction, of course.

I can get behind that, he said. So then, you said, I don't want to Work anymore. Other than writing, your job was data entry. You worked for a bloodwork lab and input patient data into the computer. It made your eyes blurry. Sometimes it did feel like pulling weeds. But surely, you said, there is no one who wants to capital-W Work?

I think we're going in circles, he said. You pulled the car gently over onto the shoulder. My eyes hurt, you said, do you think you could drive for a little bit?

He worked in finance. He didn't want to do it, but usually he told people he liked his job. People thought he made a lot of money but he didn't, really, not enough to get out of the little box that they lived in. Not yet, at least. But in his work, at least, there was always the promise of wealth, glowing in the distance like a brightly-coloured fishing lure. He got out of the passenger side and watched you as you walked around the front of the car. I love you, he said, I want to make more money so that you don't have to work. You laughed as you both got back in the car. Silly, you said, that's not what I meant.

You turned the radio off once he started driving. I just want to hear how quiet it is, you said and you were right. The farther away from the city you got, the less cars there were. For brief stretches, the two of you felt like you were the only people left in the world. You shut your eyes

and leaned your head against the window, listening to the sound of the wheels spinning across the road. If there was no money, you said softly, then maybe there would be no Work. But there would be enough, enough of everything else, surely.

Working in finance also involved a lot of inputting numbers into a computer. Often he thought, what if it all stopped working, all at the same time, all the computers, the internet. What would we do then? But to him this thought wasn't scary. It felt a little like hope. When he thought of this he felt like you did, when you saw that soil all over the table and thought, for a moment, that it had come from the sky.

The idea came to her after a dream. In it, she moved through the streets of a strange city, lit by yellow streetlamps. It was nighttime; there was no one else there. The streets were narrow and cobbled. It seemed like a kind of residential area – but all the windows were shuttered. Still, she felt no fear. Her legs moved of their own accord, towards the place she knew she was going. At the end of one of the streets she saw a piece of red yarn. She picked it up at the end and began to follow it. As she went, she noticed more and more strands of yarn, all the same red. She moved, closer to the knotted tangle in the centre, a tangle that engulfed everything around it. With ease, she entered into it. A safe, quiet place.

When she woke up, the feeling lingered. All that quietness, the soft, knotted walls holding her fast. But it wasn't enough – this space, all this yarn woven together – it needed to contain more. At her kitchen table she began to sketch it out. The piece would be in a room, a large room with high ceilings. The room would have a darkened passage leading to it, lit by small, golden lights. The main room would be brighter – people would need to see, after all, she couldn't have them tripping over anything. The most dense part of the yarn would be at the centre. People would need to be able to move through the rest of it, somehow, to get to this middle bit (*the heart* she labelled it). This was where dream-logic wouldn't work. She would need to construct some sort of structure, made of wood maybe, or metal, something to hold the yarn, to make pathways through it. But the paths would need to feel a little constricted, at least in places. There needed to be the sense that you were moving through the structure with some difficulty. A sense of near-unbearable density. A hint of claustrophobia, at least in some places – that the walls were closing in on you.

And the heart, wrapped in all that red yarn, it needed to be glowing and beating. It needed to feel real – warm, human. It needed to be sublime. The whole thing had to be bigger, bigger than just a room. A warehouse, that was what she needed. And in the rest of the maze, along the way to the heart, that's where everything else had to be contained. *Everything*. Illuminated corners in which people could sit and rest, could shut their eyes and be transported. There would be darkened corners where people could come close to one another, maybe even touch one another. Places where the boundaries between self and other melted. Where people could become whatever they wanted.

There needed to be places too where people began to feel lost. The edge of fear – *how will I ever leave this place?* There needed to be some moments of disorientation. Perhaps a turn into a darkened space, completely dark, with loud noises playing. The sounds of crowds, the sound of a riot. In the air, the scent of smoke. A quieter fear sometimes. The sound of weeping. Lost objects from your childhood, knit into the walls. Reminders of heartbreak. But just as your heart rate begins to rise, just as the breathing begins to accelerate, there, a pinprick of light saying come, come this way, and as you walk towards it it opens into a comforting vastness, the red fuzzy walls falling away from you, now decorated with garlands of flowers. The scent of rain. The sounds of a sighing meadow. You are okay, a disembodied voice says. You shut your eyes. It feels like a phantom hand is stroking your head, like they are taking your hands in theirs. And still, still they lead you to the beating, living thing at the centre of it all. As you walk you think – am I ready to meet it? But you keep moving.

Tension and release – that’s what it was all about. That’s what everything was about, anyways, and she knew that this installation needed to capture that – *everything*. Throughout it all, sometimes stronger, sometimes faint, sometimes nearly imperceptible, the heart, pumping light out through the circuits of yarn, light that sometimes snarled, or dimmed completely. Not just tension and release though – good art needed to be universal, and to be universal, first it needed specificity.

So it wasn’t just *lost objects from childhood* and *reminders of heartbreak* and *sounds of crowds* and *feeling lost* and *feeling found again*. They needed to be *lost objects from her childhood, like the little blue blanket she carried around with her until it became too dirty and her mother threw it away, and the plastic baby doll that was missing a leg and was left in the park, and maybe all the hair of her Barbie dolls she had cut off, gathered into a ball and photographs of her lovers, of her with them taken at the exact moments that they were happiest and most unaware of the endings of things, looking away from the camera, at each other with bright, private smiles and sounds of crowds that had made her feel frightened, overwhelmed, that had made her chest feel constricted, like danger waited for her around every corner, but actually, they were just normal crowds, just people like her, walking and talking, laughing, shopping, and they posed no threat really, no threat*

at all and times she had felt lost, not just physically but also existentially, that is, sometimes the world became strange and unfamiliar to her in an instant and the loneliness of this feeling made her feel like a great void was opening within her, a feeling which was too hungry to be fed and being with her friends and laughing and drinking good wine and eating olives and salted almonds and the warmth that surrounded them then, around the table where they would sit for hours, like they were wrapped in a golden light only they could see.

She knew now that it would take her years, maybe a decade, maybe longer, to make such a work. This didn't discourage her; she understood why the work was important, why it had to be made.

People would come and they would walk through, lingering in some places, rushing through others, closer and closer to the middle, towards her beating heart. And they would be there, with her, and her with them, standing in the same light, until all the boundaries between them began to blur, until, in the tangled centre, they were all there, together.