

In the Garden

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Printed in the United States of America on Acid-free paper

First Edition

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In the Garden



Stories of Wonsook Kim's Paintings

Foreword

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These stories have emerged from the forty-seven years that have somehow passed since I left Korea. Although I am not shy or anxious by nature, but I am about this book. I did not set out to write a book, but now, seeing these decades of stories bound into the pages, I feel a little proud.

I can no longer distinguish my homeland from where my real home is. Seoul, New York, Indiana, or Italy: these places are familiar and make me feel at home. Yet at the same time, all of these places feel strange and foreign. I am placeless, belonging nowhere, belonging everywhere. Throughout all these years, though, I mainly used English, so it was sad to feel my Korean slipping away, the words left unused shrinking away from my grasp. As a desperate remedy to revive my mother tongue, I began to write. I went back to reading in Korean and even did things like write my journal in Korean, but I couldn't get far without that incentive--and muse--called a deadline. So I agreed to publish serial columns in magazines and blogs, which is how this collection of writings was born.

My writings do not explain the paintings in my book. I do not think that that would even be possible. Instead, these stories simply share the landscape of my life when these pictures came about.

Some are excerpts from my journal, attached to existing paintings. Others were written only after a completed painting, words to speak for an image. At times, I saw new images while I wrote, so I began new paintings. With no clear order in mind, it all became an interesting cycle, a game of sorts.

Painting, like music, is a genre of art that expresses what language cannot. Writing is then all the more remarkable, as it uses words to express what words are not equipped to convey. It's of course worsened by my awkwardness with language, because with writing there is no place to hide, not as in a painting. For a lifelong painter, this experience has been a refreshing challenge.

Wonsook Kim



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Section I

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Myth of everyday

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The Most Beautiful Thing

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“What do you think the most beautiful thing in the world is?”

This was asked of me by a quiet poet whom I was introduced to just a few moments earlier. It was an unexpected question, but I answered nonetheless.

“People. I think human beings are the most beautiful thing in the world.”

“That is so, isn’t it?” She agreed and blushed as if she had just realized the abrupt nature of her question.

I had never thought about what the most beautiful thing in the world could be, so I was amazed that I had replied as though I had always known the answer. I like people, and even appreciate what’s unique in individuals, but am I truly certain that human beings are the most beautiful things in the world? Are they more beautiful than snow-covered mountains, the blue sky of early evenings, breathtaking sunsets, or the memory of my own mother’s face?



Since then, I have often thought about that conversation. My answer returns to me not only when I am deeply moved by others, but also when relationships make life difficult. Seeing the ugliness of myself and the people around me, I remember this answer I gave without hesitation, almost as if by reflex. The sympathy I feel for human beings, who all strive to make the best of their own reality, evokes a certain beauty of the very human nature of our existence.

I sometimes ask the same question of people I meet whom I like, wondering if anyone else might give the same answer. I am always pleased to hear other beautiful things that have never even crossed my mind, but still, my answer is people. The more I think about it, the clearer my answer gets.





Treasures on the Road

•

In my dream, I walked on an endless road.

It was a path that I walked on every day, so I didn't have to look to see where I was going. I had to continue on this road, so I hurried along on my way without wondering where it would lead me.

The bright sky began to darken, dimming the whole world. A glow of red lingered on the faraway horizon, coloring the world in a calm, subdued hue.

Suddenly, the road seemed new, as if I was walking on it for the first time. Along the sides of the road were small, delicate wildflowers, and I occasionally stopped in my tracks to glance ahead. It was then that I spotted something far off that glittered on the ground. Half excited and half afraid, I picked up the bright object. It was a gem.

The gem had a strange power; it could light up the deepest corners of my soul. I continued walking, smiling from ear to ear. When I opened my clenched hand to look at the gem again, I found two dazzling gems. This surprised me with such joy... but only for a short while. The two precious stones had a different power; they calmed my initial excitement and filled me with a profound, quiet happiness.



Carrying the precious stones in my hand, I continued my journey, gazing at the sky. My hand began to hurt, as I was clenching my fist too tightly. I held the gems even tighter out of fear that I might lose them, but I felt my palm bleeding, as if the gems had broken through my skin. I opened my hand, expecting to see a wound, but instead found three gems.

Oh, who would believe me, even if I told someone? At this thought, I felt very lonely. With the three gems in my hand, I continued my walk, admiring the world that appeared ever more brilliant. All I did was pick up a stone and hold it tight, cherishing it gratefully as a treasure, and more appeared. Now my hands are full of gems.

I see these gems as the blessings in life that can only be seen through the eyes of the mind, whisper like the soft and quiet voice of an angel. They are the precious things that are hidden in the everyday, amidst the dazzling sunlight that blinds us. A love that comes gently like the dawn, people that I did not notice when I was drunk with youth, relationships that failed because they did not meet expectations. All these precious things are now glittering in my hands. After all, it is the power of love that moves the world.

The Invisible World



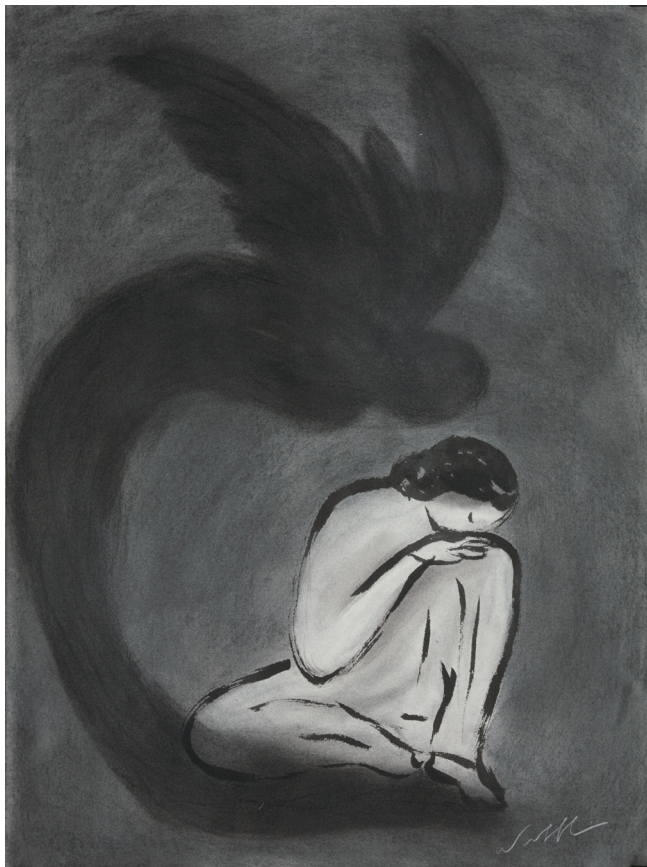
My mother was born with one supreme question as her only inheritance: “Heaven or earth?” This question was given to her by her father, Reverend Cha Jae-seon, who died early, along with her brother, as they fought against the Japanese occupation of Korea. Needless to say, the visible world was an impoverished and lonely place for her. But the vision of the invisible world always remained crystal clear in her mind.

While she raised her eight children, her eyes were always fixed toward heaven. Over the question of faith, my mother never wavered. As her daughter, I had to learn from an early age to give over what I can of the visible things in life in search of the invisible world.

During my youth, I struggled between the visible things shuttling before my eyes and the invisible world that was forced upon me. I saw her unchangingly upright beliefs as naïve and even medieval. At times, it fueled my rebellious wandering even further.

However, my mother, whose priority was to love others, showed us that the first commandment of “love” was a magic spell. The more it was shared, the more it grew, unlike visible things like a slice of cake.

My mother's world is now a little clearer to me. Though I cannot say that I could live as she did, my life's work is to paint in visible images the invisible world.



In His Shoes

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Every morning as a little girl, I used to polish my father's shoes. My father read his newspaper and ate breakfast, and I waited for him beside his newly-shined shoes. As he put on his jacket and prepared to go to work, I placed my feet into his shoes. I wondered if one day, I might marry a man with shoes as big as these. As my father tied his shoes, he slipped me some pocket money, and walked out the door.

I still polish my father's shoes, but they no longer seem so big. Instead, I see the wear and tear of many years of use; he is still busy, still walking around, still wearing his shoes out.

To put on someone else's shoes is to become that person for a moment. Yet it is also a longing for days past.



For me, shoes represent this feeling. I paint them in the style of an old, washed-out wall mural. This image is filled with yearning and nostalgia, but also wishes for days to come. The sense of longing is deepened by the moon who gazes at the shoes the seated woman is wearing.

A little girl who played house wearing her mother's clothes, yet now an adult, stands tall as the currents of time pass by. She looks to the future, or perhaps the distant past, in shoes that are still awkwardly too big for her. Will she grow out of this painful awkwardness and find peace?

Yearning and waiting show us we are alive. I open my arms to receive this precious gift from life.







Full Moon Bride

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A bride gazes at the full moon, her wedding veil faces the gentle breeze. Love, like the waves under the moonlight, draws close to her. A bright future awaits. Beside her, there is a vase full of flowers, moonlight hues to bloom eternally within the bride. The cool water of love has quenched her barren heart, and she now overflows. The moonlight bride will have a loving home to settle in. She will take care of the house as she would a treasure. Standing quiet and still, the bride embraces this love with all her body and soul. I painted the eternal image of a bride that is nestled in all of our hearts.

People have asked me why the bride stands alone. I say, perhaps this scene is before her wedding. But when I think further, isn't love always something we do alone, even when we are in love with others? To love is to confirm our own existence, which is why we give ourselves so completely.



As C. S. Lewis once said, love anyone or anything—whether it is a person, a dog, or money, and you will end up being hurt by that love. Anyone who wants to love must open their heart and take a risk. But if one closes their heart, wraps it tight over and over, their heart will only become darker and more hardened. Eventually, it will become a cold, useless rock that no one and nothing can break through or melt down. A person may be alive and breathing, but not truly living their life. Once again, as always, I surrender to believe in love.

“Home” outlines the boundary of our lives, within which a new world and universe begin to unfold. I have painted countless house-shaped paintings, of different loves and pains within that universe.



Moonlight Sonata



A full moon. It rises every month, yet it is always surprising and mysterious.

Under its bright light, everything stands still in luminous quietness, even my mind and heart. If a month passes when I miss its perfect beauty, I know that I am rushing through life too quickly.

On full-moon nights when I was young, my father would wake us up after getting home from a long workday as a beat reporter. He had us sit around the piano, sleepy-eyed, and sit through his moonlit performance.

“A long, loooong time ago, there was a musical geee-nius named Beethoven. He became deaf and was very saaaad, so he composed this famous piano piece while looking at the huge beautiful moon,” my father would say, as he started to play Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. The performance was always the same. He would play



the lower notes with his left hand, but after playing only a few measures, he would stop his performance, and say, “Kids, are you all falling asleep? Get back into bed and sleep tight—.” Later on, I realized he stopped because he could only play the easier measures that introduced the piece. Still, I always enjoyed watching the show that he performed under the full moonlight, each time gaining a new appreciation, even though it was the same rerun. My mother would say the performance was tedious, but she never once stopped him.

Even today, under the full moonlight, I think about poor old deaf Beethoven and the first few measures of his Moonlight Sonata. And I miss my father who made the bright moon shine even brighter.

Tree by the Water

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Perhaps because he was born on April Fool's Day, my father is a master at making things up. He was gifted with the ability to recreate and transform the tedious and repetitious moments of our daily lives into fun and amusing stories. My father is a man of faith, and a real-life artist who cares more for the invisible world than the visible one.

Even now, he observes April Fool's Day religiously, even more seriously than birthdays or holidays. It is touching to see him prepare his pranks with such detail and intensity, and to execute them perfectly. For the last eighty years, he has always thought of how to have more fun with "life," this precious and valuable gift.

Trees planted near water blossom and bear fruit. It was my father's innate character and faith that provided him with water, and he in turn became the water for his children.



For his eightieth birthday party, I painted a picture of my father dreaming of heaven while lying under a strong, vibrant tree. This is a portrait of a man who considers “fun” as the most important element in art and life.

When life becomes troubled and dark, his amusing stories give me a smile. Despair does not last long in the face of his positive energy. I know that I have inherited half of my father’s DNA, but I wonder if I can ever be like him.



My Fiftieth Birthday

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The Basilica of San Petronio stands in the heart of the beautiful medieval city of Bologna. It almost seems as if the city was formed around the Basilica. Inside, the church is filled with breathtaking murals that come alive as your eyes adjust to the dark, mysterious space. Fascinated by these murals, I spent days at a time sketching them.

In part, I was drawn to the Basilica because it felt as dark and heavy as my heart. After twenty years of marriage, I was going through a divorce; I was down and exhausted when my sister suggested that I come to Italy to stay with her. I managed to pull myself together, pack a bag, and travel to Bologna, where my sister had prepared a studio inside a small attic apartment for me. After unpacking my things, I began to walk the streets. The city was so full of beautiful paintings, magnificent sculptures, and ornate buildings, but my heart remained painfully heavy. It was the first time in twenty years that I had been truly alone, and I was uncertain and afraid.

After drawing in the Basilica one day, I stepped out of the dark church into the bright daylight as a flock of pigeons soared into





Wings 99.

the sky. It was as if they had been waiting for me. To anyone else, it would have been an ordinary scene, but on this particular day, it struck me as if I was seeing birds fly for the first time. It revealed how brilliant the world could be. My next thought was that I would like to have my wedding here one day. I am still clueless as to where this nonsensical thought came from—at the time, getting married again seemed about as likely as going to the moon. This abrupt idea was all the more unimaginable as I had vowed not to throw my life away foolishly for something like love. I had vowed to devote myself only to painting, exchanging the fetters of love for freedom. I sat in a café on the piazza, laughing at myself. I hadn't learned anything; I was still a hopeless romantic.

Then I met Thomas. Like a blurry image coming into focus through a camera lens, my world became colorful again and I thought of that brilliant afternoon on the piazza. It was as if I had found a treasure that I wasn't even looking for, a companion I had not been waiting for. And before long, we were discussing marriage. So, where was my resolution now?



We had a wedding ceremony on my fiftieth birthday in a small Protestant church in Bologna, right next to the Basilica. Some of my closest friends from the United States and Korea attended, and my sister prepared a wonderful reception. I had always wished that, for my fiftieth birthday, I would do something special. Somehow, the unlikely wish from that sunny afternoon came true.



Thomas' First American Birthday

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When we visited North Korea to support a humanitarian healthcare project, my husband Thomas was asked by an official at the banquet, “What made you donate to this cause?” This was his immediate answer to that question.

“I am an orphan of the Korean War. My mother abandoned me on a busy street corner, and I roamed the streets with other homeless children. I was far too wrapped up in the game of survival to realize my own sorrow. One day, a missionary took me to an orphanage, where I was given a new birthday and name. After living there for about a year, I was adopted by an American family from Massachusetts.

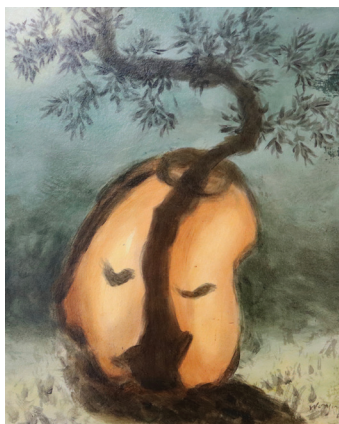
“My new birthday happened to fall on a date only a few weeks after I arrived in America. Although I didn’t speak any English, I could tell from the balloons hung up in the house and the food set on the table that it was a day specially prepared for me. The neighborhood kids came with gifts. Holding the toys they brought for me in my arms, I burst into tears because I was so happy and sad at the same time. In the orphanage, I had to give back any toys after I played with them.



I was so worried that these fancy toys were going to be taken away from me that I piled the gifts into one corner of the room. I stood there with my arms spread open to stop anyone from taking them.

“My adoptive parents tried to talk me away from the corner, but I stood firm to guard my treasures, crying even more loudly. Unable to communicate with me in English, the kids began to play by themselves. I wanted to play with them, but I could not let go of my toys.

“I think about that day often: when I missed my own birthday party guarding my treasures in the corner. As I have grown, I have made the decision to pick up my toys and join others. I would rather play together than miss out on meaningful opportunities in life. Today is one of those wonderful parties.



Full Moon in the Mirror

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My husband Thomas is an avid soccer player. The evening before each game, he hangs his soccer uniform and shoes beside the door in preparation for the next day. After one game when he scored two goals on apparently spectacular headers, his eyes began to show strange symptoms. Very soon afterwards, he underwent eye surgery. When he woke up, his doctor advised him to keep his head down for two weeks until the wound healed. After a lifetime of holding his head high, Thomas began his head-down therapy, a stifling and difficult limitation.

On one of those nights, my sister in Italy faxed me a sketch of her sitting under a full moon, adding, "You have to see the full moon tonight. It's amazing." Between visiting the doctor's office and putting eye drops into Thomas's eyes at the prescribed times, we hardly knew whether it was raining or shining. It was a refreshing reminder to look up at the sky. After dinner I led him into the garden. I didn't want to look up at the full moon alone when he could not raise his head, so I carried a mirror. We sat together for a long time, gazing at the moon in the mirror. In my hands, the moon looked brighter and more mysterious.



Ever since then, I have carried a mirror with me. It gave me a new way to look upon a strangely familiar world, and brought new dimensions to everyday life. I began to paint things as I saw them in the mirror.

Just as the moon seemed brighter within the mirror's frame, our own frames, or the limitations that we live with, can also enrich and deepen our lives. I believe our lives are brighter because of limitations, in spite of limitations.



Then and Now

•

One spring day many years ago now, Daniel, my very dear sister's husband, wept as he looked up at the spring trees blanketed with cherry blossoms. At the age of only thirty, he faced almost certain death from a cancer that had spread throughout his body.

That day, he said that the trees looked even more beautiful to him, knowing he would never see the blossoms again. I hesitated to reply, not knowing how to comfort him. I put my arms around his shoulders and told him that if he didn't see the blossoms here next spring, he would look down at them from heaven and view a perfect scene, invisible to our eyes. But all day I regretted what I said. Maybe I should have said, "What are you talking about? You'll get better. You'll see these brilliant blossoms again next year." Daniel was devoutly religious; he did not believe that life ended in burial and an empty return to dust, but rather that it continued in an eternal afterlife. Although I regretted what I had said, Daniel instead was the one to comfort me, saying, "Thank you for your sincere and honest words." He was always that kind of warm-hearted person.

Shortly afterwards, he passed away. I have never been able to look at spring blossoms the same way.

I still remember when Daniel first started walking with a cane, after a year of fighting cancer. It was heartbreaking to see this once-healthy young man so affected by his disease. But I also admired the wisdom and maturity he showed in being willing to rely on a cane, rather than those who struggled on their own, leaning on nothing. So I painted his life in the series, *A Man with a Cane*.

Following this series, I created the *Then and Now* series, which shows two scenes side-by-side, framed in one picture. The two panes have the same backdrop but follow different timeframes. In this series, I painted things that stand unchanged in a changing world.

One pane shows a man who is dreaming with his cane set against a rock, but in the next pane, he is gone. Only the sunset, the rock, and the cane remain. I painted a scene of petals falling like snowflakes on a spring day and a man looking up, standing amidst it all. Another shows a man struggling in the water, barely climbing out, and then later, gazing at the gentle river while sitting on the same rock.

The difference between then and now: a man who once existed and is now gone. Both scenes are a reflection of some reality.







Lilies on a Cliff

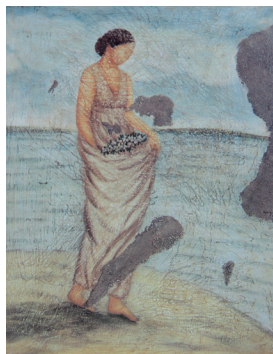
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She stands on the edge of a cliff. A man looks up from below, holding lilies. Many times in life, we come to the edge of our own cliffs. Because lilies are a symbol of hope and salvation, I painted them on a lower height, where we eventually go down. The lilies represent the fragments of our lives that we can only see dimly now.

Years ago, I had the good fortune to live in the beautiful city of Bologna. I had visited Italy several times, but living there was a completely different experience. The medieval city of Bologna still bears the splendor of its past; the whole city is a museum. I was envious of the aspiring artists, who, at every art gallery, placed their easels in front of paintings and sketched away. So I made my own daily routine, which filled me with joy. I began to sketch the Renaissance paintings and murals that filled the city.







After the Middle Ages, Renaissance artists painted works that were alive with love, extolling the beauty of the human body, celebrating humanness in all. Although the colors of the murals have faded, the images on the damaged walls allowed my imagination to fill in the blanks with my own story. We only see fragments of our short lives in the present, and while we are passing through it, we cannot understand what the big picture looks like, or even what it means.

Many churches of Europe are filled with paintings of Jesus suffering. The image of Jesus is always centered, but what catches my eye are the images of women bitterly crying beside him. I painted a self-portrait of myself as a woman crying in despair, having lost both hope and love, wiping away tears in the winds of change. In her hands, I placed two broken lilies, the flower of hope. Though broken and cut off, they remain beautiful because they are reminiscent of what was once whole.

Painting something painful mirrors a longing for perfection and wholeness. One day, we will have complete knowledge of what we now know only in part.



Being Together to Be Alone

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Lost in time and space, lovers look down at the reflection of the moon on the water. They are free from sadness and longing. They have become one, body and soul, floating in the clouds.

But dreamy days will one day give way to our destined solitary journey. The dance will end, the moon will wane, and yet, living memories of these magical days will brighten our path on this journey.





Being Together to Be Alone



Section II

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Everyday, joy and sorrow

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Eternal Now

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One unexpectedly warm winter day, I was walking along the lake near my house. The sun was shining brilliantly that day, but inside I was tangled up with helpless thoughts. I couldn't enjoy the day at all. As I looked at the shining lake, I tried to overcome these feelings by counting the things that I was grateful for.

Though the list filled up with countless blessings, words like "but" and "however" kept returning, to the point of even frightening me.

Then I received an uplifting letter from a friend that changed my outlook. It ended, "Every day is a new beginning." Now, I often say to myself, "Well, every day is a new beginning," and that does the magic. I have received many timely nudges from her since then.

The woman by the river edge carries a boat with a wind-filled sail on her head. So long as there is a burning fire in her heart, a river



running beneath her feet, a soft wind carrying her along, her boat will surely sail forward. This is an image of a new beginning.

Planting a tree on a rainy day is also a new beginning. So long as it rains and so long as the tree is firmly planted, the tree will grow to give shade for rest. The promise of a new beginning is fulfilled.

With all these new beginnings, where does it all end? The end may be part of the journey, but making a fresh and promising beginning is my lot. The end is not.



Angry Fish Seller

••

Many years ago I lived in Sugar Hill, a neighborhood in New York's Harlem. I was in need of a large space, and Sugar Hill was the suitable choice for a struggling artist with a large family. I felt young and brave to be a pioneer in that rundown part of the city.

On Broadway in central Harlem, there was a large seafood store run by a grumpy Korean man. After working in my studio all day, I used to go out to buy mackerel, my favorite fish, for dinner. It was always crowded there, and I had to stand in line for a long time. Since I would rush to the store in the middle of painting, I would look woefully unkempt, which meant that, as he sat perched on a tall chair surveying everyone and everything, the storeowner always frowned and sighed when he saw me. He would fan himself with irritable impatience in front of an electric fan, and wore the trademark look of discontent that many Korean storeowners in the city bore. He looked exhausted by immigrant life; I wondered whether he was someone who had graduated from a prestigious Korean university, only to be selling fish in an over-crowded market in Harlem.



One afternoon, I was once again in line to buy two mackerels, the cheapest fish in the store. The owner suddenly jumped off his chair, snatched my plastic bag of two fish, and started throwing big shrimp and salmon filets into it, muttering, "Try something different for a change, for God's sake." He continued, "Seeing you live in this horrible neighborhood gets on my nerves. And why do you have to buy the same cheap fish every day? Mackerel, damn mackerel, all the time... Seriously, why do you live like this?" Scolding me, he shoved the bag of seafood into my hands and told me to just go. On my way home, I thought about what had happened. I had just been kicked out of the store, but given free bags of seafood. Was it because he felt sorry for me? Or did he just use me as an outlet for his anger? Could he be so obtuse as to judge others based on the fish that they buy? Could I have offended him by just showing up? I found it both laughably absurd and embarrassing.

After that incident, buying my tasty mackerels became a complicated affair. Before going to the store, I started to brush my hair and wear nicer clothes. I even put on lipstick. I bought other seafood besides mackerel, greeting the owner with a cautious smile. Yet he remained on his high stool, giving me a look of displeasure, as if to say, "Whatever you try, I know your kind. Don't even bother." Eventually, we ended up eating less mackerel, which made the kids happy. It simply became too much of a chore to go to that store.

But I wonder if the fish seller considered himself a fortunate man, as he provided people in a depressed neighborhood with fresh fish while making money at the same time. I also wonder if I ever convinced him that I preferred mackerel over every other fish. We were both too caught up in our lives to ever find out.





The Golden Ax



When my children were young, I sent them to Korean language school on the weekends. I thought that they should learn proper Korean. They grumbled, complaining that they were being forced to go to school even on their days off. I pushed them to go anyway, either by bribing them with money or guilting them with a frown. It was a stressful time for all of us, and so I read to them from Korean picture books to make it more fun.

One of the stories I read to them was called *The Golden Ax*.

The story begins with a poor woodcutter, weeping bitterly after dropping his ax in a pond. Suddenly, a mountain fairy appears out of the water. She presents one silver and one golden ax, and asks the woodcutter which one belongs to him. He answers, "They are both beautiful, but neither is mine. My ax is very old and ugly." Impressed and moved by his honest answer, the mountain fairy gives him both the axes as a reward. The woodcutter and his family then live happily ever after.

It is a story about how honesty brings happiness. I told my kids, "You have to be honest, just like the woodcutter," but I knew

myself that I had neither the patience to wait for a mountain fairy to appear nor the courage to say no to a golden ax. So, I painted a self-portrait of me diving into the pond to retrieve the gold and silver axes myself. My children giggled at the painting: “That’s right. Mom would do that because she hates to wait, and that way she wouldn’t have to lie.”

I thought I knew my kids, but they surprised me. They knew me much better than I knew them. I hope that they get to know themselves and others well enough to live their lives with such wisdom.





A War on Frogs

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Fall is quiet. It is quiet compared to summer, which is noisy.

In early spring, we had a lot of rain, so the small pond in our garden overflowed and flooded the yard. One day, sitting on the patio of my studio while having tea, I saw small puddles around the yard filled with tadpoles frantically squirming. Ah, what should I do with these little creatures! I ran to the kitchen for a large spoon, scooped up all of the tadpoles and delivered them back into the pond. I even went back for the spawn with sprouting tails that I might have stepped on while rushing around.

And then, all summer long, I had to wage a war on frogs. Probably because of the unusually wet spring, there were more frogs than ever before. Every night they croaked as if they were screaming. I asked my husband, “What could they be screaming about so much?” My husband answered that they were looking for love. So when I yelled into the night, “Boys, settle down!” they would stop for about ten seconds before resuming their croaking.

I like the singing of birds and cicadas. I don't even mind the caw of crows, which Koreans view as a bad omen. But the incessant, angry screams of frogs undid me. "I can't live like this. I'm going to crack. Can't you hear me?" It was not the first time that my good intentions created an unfortunate outcome.

But all things come to an end. The long, noisy summer grew cool, and I stopped having to roam the house in the middle of the night with my pillow for a quiet spot. It was calm and quiet again. After the frost, all of the frogs disappeared. In the fall, my garden, usually filled with the sound of crickets chirping, was quiet. When the snow fell, even the memory of the noisy frogs faded away into silence.





The Fish and the Bird's Dance

••

I have always liked cranes. Graceful and poised, these long-necked birds always impress me with their serene beauty, like that of a crescent moon. But recently, the crane has become my enemy. I am at war with them.

We dug a fishpond in our garden, complete with a fountain and rocks surrounding it. Inside the pond, we placed finger-sized koi fish. They have now grown to be the length of my arm and are brilliant in color. Every morning and evening, I go to feed these beautiful fish. But one day, cranes began to steal into the pond and eat the fish. If the fish were too big to eat in one mouthful, the cranes would simply spit them out onto the lawn and leave them there. Sometimes we would come home to find dead fish strewn about the garden. And so the war started. As a scare tactic, I placed several loudly colorful rubber snakes around the pond, and even some sculptures of large birds, but to no avail. I even covered the pond with a net, but the outcome was that the net caught and tangled the frogs that used to jump in and out of the pond.

Nature is not always beautiful and peaceful. From the tiny ants marching on the ground to the cranes flying over them, our garden is a battlefield where each species struggles for survival. And though

I am powerful among the creatures, I am still powerless to change the order of nature. So, I perform a futile ritual dance, scaring off birds and wishing my dead fish would fly up into the sky.







Suffering Pear Tree

••

I am trying in vain to lose weight. I have sincere respect for those who succeed. It's very difficult when I am surrounded with so many food choices. Temperance amidst abundance is torture.

This spring, a small pear tree that we planted three years ago blossomed with snow-white flowers and started to bear tiny fruits. So pretty and precious were the fruits, I could not prune any of the branches as I should have. Through the summer, the tree was laden with plenty of ripening pears. Soon the branches could not bear the weight of the pears and bent toward the ground like weeping willows. The pear tree was suffering because of its greedy owner. I felt bad seeing the drooping branches, but I could not give up the ripening pears.

Then fall came along. We ate the small, ugly pears with regret. If I had pruned the tree properly, it would have not suffered and produced bigger, sweeter pears with none left to rot. We simply were greedy, another story of failing to control myself under an environment of abundance.







Fix Your Eyes

••

My body is changing, getting heavier. It's no secret that we should eat less and exercise more to delay this change. But I don't seem to be made out for either. My body used to carry me around faithfully wherever I wanted to go, but I'm afraid it will soon become a burden that I must carry around instead, and thereafter a jail that I am trapped in. So, doing what I can to slow down this relentless arc of life, I've been hitting the gym.

Since I'm too lazy to exercise regularly by myself, I joined a fitness program. Time passes more quickly when it's a scheduled class that you have to pay for. For one of the exercises during the session, I have to perform strange maneuvers while standing on one leg. My body starts to shake and wobble, and then I have to start all over again. The instructor shouts and tells me to concentrate and keep my gaze on one spot.

"Fix your eyes!"

Ah, I see! I quickly find a stain on the wall to stare at, and now I find I can actually stand on one leg and move my body. Fix your eyes. If you focus on one spot, you're less likely to wobble or fall. In our daily battlefield as well where we struggle to survive, we need to cut out the distractions and fix our eyes.

Like a woman who dances while looking up to heaven even on a rainy, stormy day.



Guitar Lessons for an Ant

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My son had graduated from college and was looking for a job. He was in his early twenties, at the heady age when the world seemed to be at his feet. But the conditions that he had set for taking a job sounded unrealistic and ill-advised to me. So it was all I could do to swallow the words of advice that fluttered on my tongue. I would respect him as an adult, I wouldn't badger him with nagging because it felt like only yesterday when I was driven mad by all the irritating lectures from elders stating the already obvious.





Actually, it was something of a relief to see that my son had a different point of view. It would have been disappointing if my children shared the same standards and ideas as me. So, I listened to him attentively, dropping a few questions just to show my genuine interest. Before I knew it, I found that listening to him opened up a new world.

My son teaches me, a workaholic ant, how to enjoy life as a grasshopper does. Today has enough worries of its own. The grasshopper teaches the ant, who is preoccupied with worrying about tomorrow, how to play the guitar and sing. Though I worry that we might both starve to death in the winter after playing around like this, I press on to learn how to sing. Because I know that his young winters will surely be different from mine.



Underneath the Apple Tree

••

I was born into a large, musical family, with many of my siblings playing instruments. Three of my younger sisters are professional musicians, their instruments being piano, violin and cello. There's also a trained singer and a saxophonist. The only exceptions were my sister who became a doctor and my brother who became an engineer. And me. But since I neither did well in school nor had musical talent, I always felt like an outsider. In fact, I was told that so often that once, during the dark days of adolescence, I went under a bridge by the Han River and cried myself silly.

Even though I loved music, I never took up an instrument, because I knew I couldn't measure up to my musical prodigy siblings. Growing up, I even had a secret fantasy that I would be an opera singer in my next life. Even today I love going to the opera alone (and sketching).

At one point in my life, I used to live next door to the Manhattan School of Music, so I was always listening to the sound of students practicing their various instruments. Whenever someone sang, I would stop to listen. One day, I heard a beautiful soprano voice through an upper-floor window singing one of my favorite songs,

an aria from Tosca. Wanting to listen more closely, I entered the lobby of the building. I looked around while I listened to the song and saw a bulletin board full of notices about music lessons. There were many notices for vocal lessons. Some said even beginners were welcome.

I agonized. For months. I wanted so badly to start taking voice lessons, but I was too afraid of embarrassing myself. An adult novice who couldn't even read music! But finally, I gathered the courage to post my own notice on the bulletin board: "I'm a middle-aged woman. I'm not very good at singing, but I really want to learn. I'm looking for a patient teacher. Please give me a call."

I waited several days, but no one called me. I gave up, thinking that it was for the best. Then, I received a phone call from a student named Caren. She didn't do much listening, but simply told me that the lesson would be once a week for half an hour and that I should pay for each lesson in advance. Many restless nights passed before the first lesson. Yet, it was finished after only repeating a few vocal exercises, singing "Ah... ah... ah..." I could not tell whether the lesson went well or not. I felt that Caren was simply passing the time without doing much, but I waited another week, anxiously anticipating the next lesson.



During the second lesson, we continued the same vocal exercises. In the middle, I timidly asked Caren whether we could sing a song, perhaps starting with a simple one. She gave me an annoyed look but flipped through her music scores and picked out a book. She opened it on top of the piano, told me to listen, and started singing.

It was called *Underneath the Apple Tree*, a sad love song with a familiar story--there was a couple deeply in love, but the man leaves one day, and the woman sits under an apple tree waiting in tears for his return.

As beautiful, young Caren sang, an image of a girl-waiting underneath the apple tree appeared in my mind. Tears welled in my eyes and I choked up. Caren told me to sing along, so I began to sing, while sobbing. She looked over at me, her hopelessly emotional, middle-aged student. She ended the lesson, saying that we should continue next week, even though our time was not up. I never heard from her again.

That was the end of my brief vocal career. But thinking about those two lessons makes me smile. We were an unlikely pair--Caren was probably too young to understand what it meant to wait and wait for someone who had abandoned you, but I had many memories of love and sorrow.





Our Own Garden



It was when I visited the Grand Canyon. I was rooted to the spot, astonished by the magnificent vista, when a group of tourists poured out of a bus with cameras dangling from their necks. They took only brief glances at the scenery before taking polaroids of themselves with the grandeur of the landscape as backdrop. Only when they looked at the photos they had taken did they exclaim in amazed wonder. That's when it clicked again for me. We relate more to nature when we are connected to it, when we become a part of it, holding it in our hands. Only then does it become more intimately real for us.

My garden is like that to me. Behind our home, where fields and a lake stretch out across a wide expanse, we built a walled-in garden that abuts the house. Inside the border, we dug a pond for fish to splash in, placed big rocks around it, and planted flowering trees. With nature under my care, all that is within the garden seems to belong to me: not just the trees, the water, and the rocks, but even the clouds, snow, and rain. A person with no garden to tend might still place flowerpots under the windows and see through this little world of nature shadows of the boundless world beyond.





Is it that we appreciate and love something more when we possess it? Or are we only able to love and cherish the things that seem manageable in size? Since the workings of the creator are unfathomable to us, perhaps this is the way stories were written, bound and planted by the creator in the garden of our consciousness.

In this painting, the man dreams, and the woman sees a white bird resting on a wall after flying endlessly through the air. Through the bird, she sees a larger world.





Quiet Forgiveness



There is an old, beautiful city named Oaxaca in the southern part of Mexico. In the center of the city is a museum, a legacy of the Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo. Tamayo was born in Oaxaca, but later lived in New York and Paris, and became an internationally renowned artist. During his life, he collected masterpieces of Pre-Columbian Art and left a beautiful museum housing his collection in his hometown.

As history records, when the Spaniards invaded the American Continent in 1519, the Aztec king welcomed them with gold and silver, believing that the white-faced foreigners were the sons of God they had been waiting for.



However, centuries of brutal rule by the Spaniards destroyed the thousand-year-old culture of the Aztecs, along with their temples. With the stones taken from the ruined temples, the invaders built magnificent churches on the same ground where the temples used to stand. Visiting deserted sites of old temples and the grandiose churches right next to them, I experienced the bitterness of history. It was as if I was at the scene of a crime, viewing memorials to the invaders who forced so much suffering upon a people.

A modest structure amidst the remnants of a turbulent past, the Rufino Tamayo Museum quietly remembers an artist and his love for humanity. The museum is like a single gift, comforting the innocent and peaceful faces of native people, seeking silent forgiveness for the cruel history that humans have created. There's a special eloquence in the fact that, although the museum houses a vast collection, it does not include any of Tamayo's paintings or any photographs of him.

My Name is Marinella



My sister and I took a trip across the small islands of Greece. We were inspired to go, not only by the peaceful photos of white houses against the backdrop of the blue sky and ocean, but also by Rainer Maria Rilke's advice about how "one must see the islands of the Aegean Sea before...."

With beautiful historical sites visible everywhere you look from the minute you step on shore, the island of Rhodes was breathtaking. To save time, we hired a taxi driver whose salesmanship and haggling abilities were impressive--or perhaps he chose us. Regardless, the inside of his car was decorated with a loud assortment of flowers and beads.

"Hi, my name is Michael. What are yours?" he said. Before we even had the chance to answer, he interjected, "Oh, no, I'll name you for today. You're Marinella and your sister is Mariana. The first one means 'the sea' and the other is an island flower. Pretty, no?" Instantly, we were renamed. It's possible that Michael wasn't his real name either.

Perhaps he simply didn't feel like memorizing the names of the different tourists he met each day, and even if he had wanted to learn our names, he would hardly have been able to pronounce the exotic Asian sounds correctly. I thought of it as almost a professional consideration that he decided to skip the entire complicated process.

My new name, Marinella, a woman of the sea. I felt strangely buoyant from using a different name. It wasn't so bad to become someone else for a while; after all, a vacation is all about leaving behind familiar things.

Almost in a world of his own, our driver talked in excitement.

"Oh, Marinella, look at the villa over there. Isn't it beautiful? Benito Mussolini thought this island was the most beautiful place in the world and built a city and a palace for himself to live in forever, but he died before he even had the chance to visit."

But at each magnificent historical site and museum, death was present. Piles of stones from collapsed structures and ruined relics were scattered everywhere. These works had been inspired by death, as expressions of prayer for good fortune and as objects of beauty to convey to the next world.

How wonderful and sublime were their lives that they yearned to continue living this way even in the afterlife?

"Marinella, come this way and smile. Mariana, you stand there." Thanks to the chatterbox driver who guided us all afternoon, I hardly wanted to leave when our vacation came to an end.

And now, back to my real name.



Scissors

••

I take a bouquet of flowers, carefully arrange them in a vase, and place them in the middle of the room.

The flowers brighten every corner of the room. Then I pick up a pair of scissors and trim the flowers.

Never satisfied, I can never leave things as they are.

Once I set goals, I strive toward them with painstaking effort. Yet, I can't stop to enjoy myself, but instead look for the next goal to pursue.

Fearful that I will be like stagnant water if I stay at my destination, I look for another place to flow toward.

How did I come to live my life in such a rush?

I would rather learn how to stop and find tranquility, rather than something newer, better, deeper, and more beautiful.

If I keep living this way, I'm afraid that I might cut off flowers that are still fresh and precious.



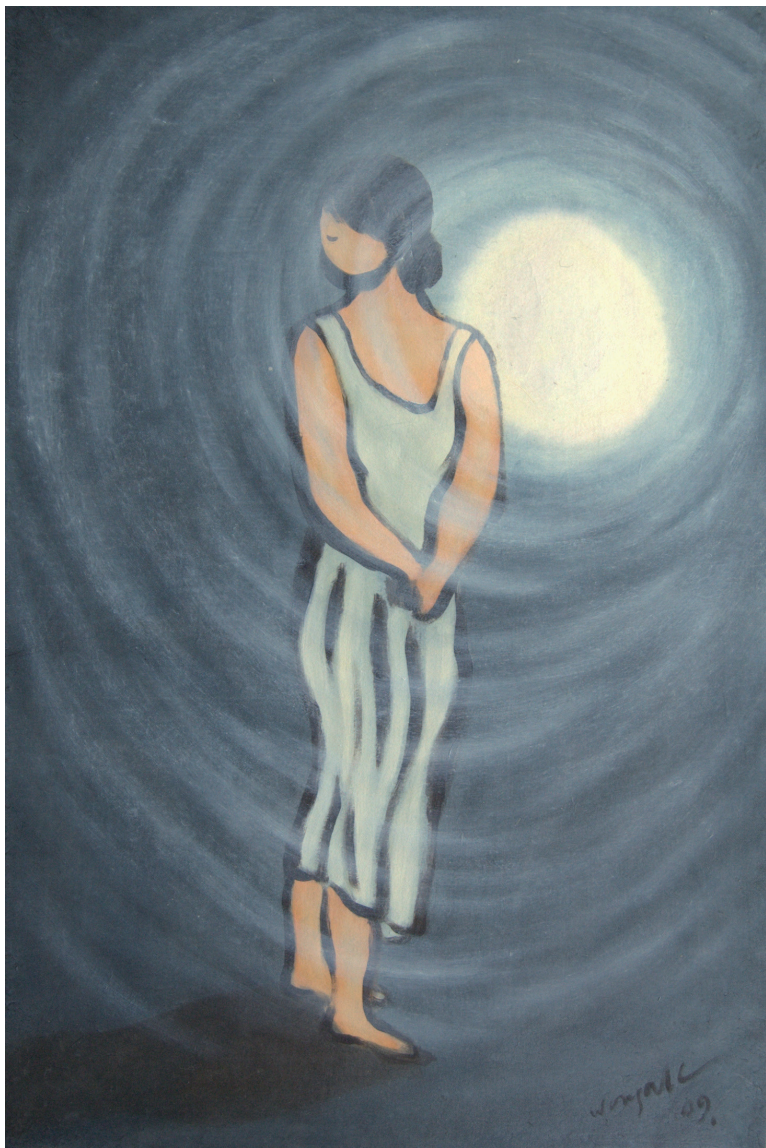
Live Like the Moon



There's nothing uncommon about the moon shining in the night sky, but to me it always looks new and magical. Seeing it feels like a discovery of something, even though I was never really looking. Just like that, I feel quietly happy.

The bright sunlight reveals everything, but the moonlight veils the world in mystery and peace. Its light is enchanted, hiding trifling details and only showing the big picture with a soft shadow.

We may get melancholy, a little sad, but it's hard to have bad thoughts while looking at the moon.





From a full moon to a crescent, the moon is always changing,
always generous and warm.

I paint the moon quite frequently for that magical transformation.

If only I could live as giving and peaceful a life as the moon.



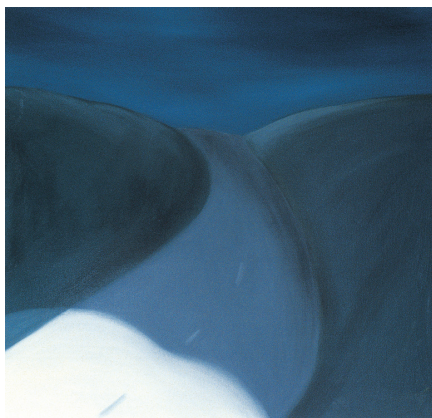
The Slow Road

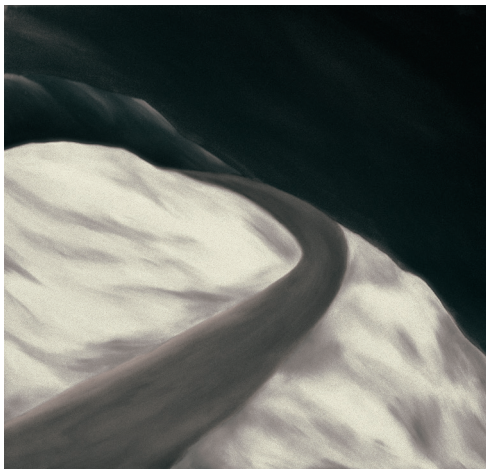
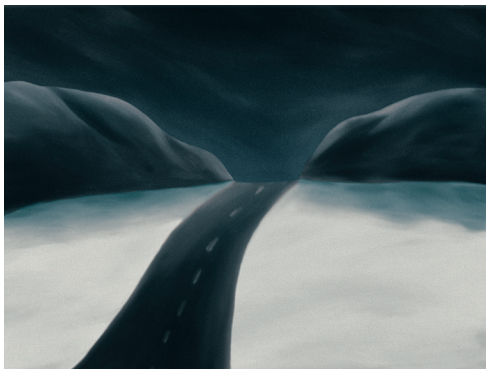
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Off the main road into town, there is a turn-off that winds into a back road. The road goes over and around hills to a forest, crosses a clearing, and becomes a country road along a quiet lake.

Because I enjoy taking in the four seasons and watching landscapes change, I take this longer detour sometimes. I drive slowly, thinking slow thoughts.

“Small is the gate and narrow the way,” I think. I do not regret taking this slow road.







Section III

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Paintings, magic from life

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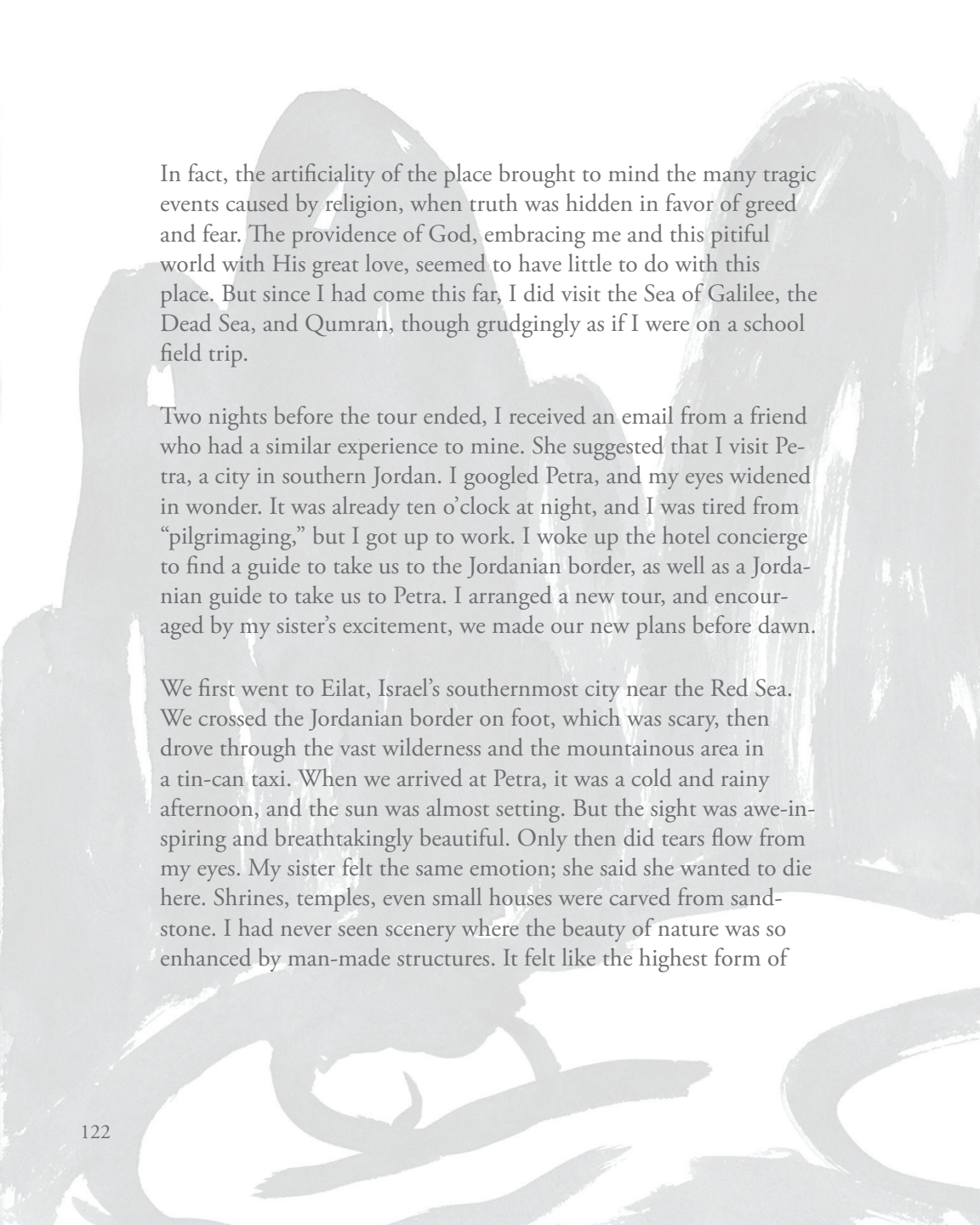


Petra



I finally took a trip to Israel. Bethlehem, Gethsemane, the Judean Desert. Having heard stories about these sacred places my entire life, they seemed even more familiar to me than my hometown. I had never managed to visit them, however, until my sister asked me as she turned fifty to travel with her there to fulfill her lifelong wish. But when I arrived, it felt strangely distant, almost as if I had been betrayed.

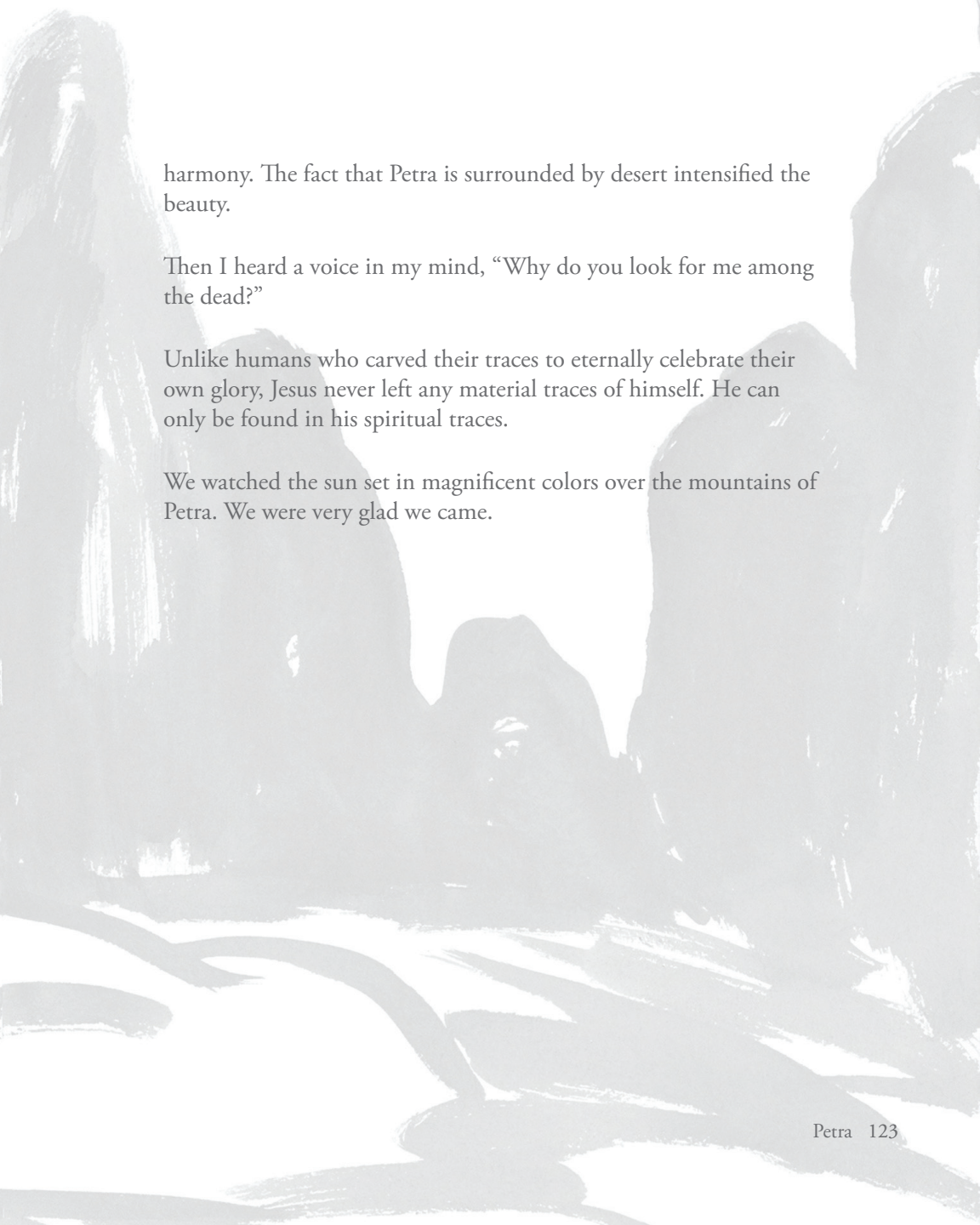
The Temple of Jerusalem is in the center of the city, surrounded by synagogues, mosques, and churches that embody the past glory of Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. We passed a church that is said to house the remains of Adam, historic sites from the Old Testament, sacred places where Jesus had worked his missions. There were lines of pilgrims and tourists, countless stores selling the same souvenirs. On top of that, every religious site in every locale seemed crowded with loud Korean tourists, who, along with Jesus, seemed the main prop of the people's livelihoods there. This isn't it, this isn't it, I kept thinking. Although I did not know what I was expecting, this felt sad. Perhaps I thought I would shed tears walking on this holy land, but the sense that it was a Disneyland-like religious theme park crushed me with disappointment.



In fact, the artificiality of the place brought to mind the many tragic events caused by religion, when truth was hidden in favor of greed and fear. The providence of God, embracing me and this pitiful world with His great love, seemed to have little to do with this place. But since I had come this far, I did visit the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea, and Qumran, though grudgingly as if I were on a school field trip.

Two nights before the tour ended, I received an email from a friend who had a similar experience to mine. She suggested that I visit Petra, a city in southern Jordan. I googled Petra, and my eyes widened in wonder. It was already ten o'clock at night, and I was tired from "pilgrimaging," but I got up to work. I woke up the hotel concierge to find a guide to take us to the Jordanian border, as well as a Jordanian guide to take us to Petra. I arranged a new tour, and encouraged by my sister's excitement, we made our new plans before dawn.

We first went to Eilat, Israel's southernmost city near the Red Sea. We crossed the Jordanian border on foot, which was scary, then drove through the vast wilderness and the mountainous area in a tin-can taxi. When we arrived at Petra, it was a cold and rainy afternoon, and the sun was almost setting. But the sight was awe-inspiring and breathtakingly beautiful. Only then did tears flow from my eyes. My sister felt the same emotion; she said she wanted to die here. Shrines, temples, even small houses were carved from sandstone. I had never seen scenery where the beauty of nature was so enhanced by man-made structures. It felt like the highest form of



harmony. The fact that Petra is surrounded by desert intensified the beauty.

Then I heard a voice in my mind, “Why do you look for me among the dead?”

Unlike humans who carved their traces to eternally celebrate their own glory, Jesus never left any material traces of himself. He can only be found in his spiritual traces.

We watched the sun set in magnificent colors over the mountains of Petra. We were very glad we came.

A Lady in Waiting

...

A woman with a bird waits for a full moon. Serenity resides in waiting. To wait is to fight against time, but in silence, one can befriend time. In the midst of rushing around in our daily lives, harried and made anxious by time, we can find peace if we find the time and place to be quiet and still. But when I sit to empty my mind, it bustles endlessly with noisy, trivial thoughts. They say that tranquility lies past this stage, but I cannot seem to get there.

To achieve soothing calm, taking a bath is the best thing for me. Lying in the bathtub, I look at my feet poking out of the water. I see the reflection of the window on the water, which overlaps with that of a bird sitting on a tree outside.





As the water washes my body clean, troubles that plague my thoughts are washed away. As I watch the water draining away, I see with a new perspective. I even grow wise, seeing the forest instead of the trees.

Problems that cannot be worked out by a bath, though, are hopeless.



A Camel in the Eye of a Needle

...

A camel sits, looking at a needle. It wants to pass through the eye of the needle, it wants to grasp both heavenly and worldly glory. It has thought hard all day, but in vain. The sun begins to set, casting the long, clear shadow of the needle on the ground. The eye of the needle grows large in the shadow. Catching the magical moment, the camel immediately jumps into the hole in the shadow, thinking about how easy it was after all. Strangely, however, it feels neither pride nor pleasure. So, it sits down, facing the needle again.

This is a story I wrote when I was facing a large problem. As a new year approaches, I swear to fulfill my humble wish, even though I have failed dozens of times over the past decades.

I want to do away with the extra things that I possess, and live simply. I am in the afternoon of my life, and the shadows are growing longer. I feel the extra weight on my body, belongings I've hoarded in my closet, names that fill my address book but not my heart. I have made another big wish that will fail again this year.

And so, I sit down next to the camel.



Drawing the Wind



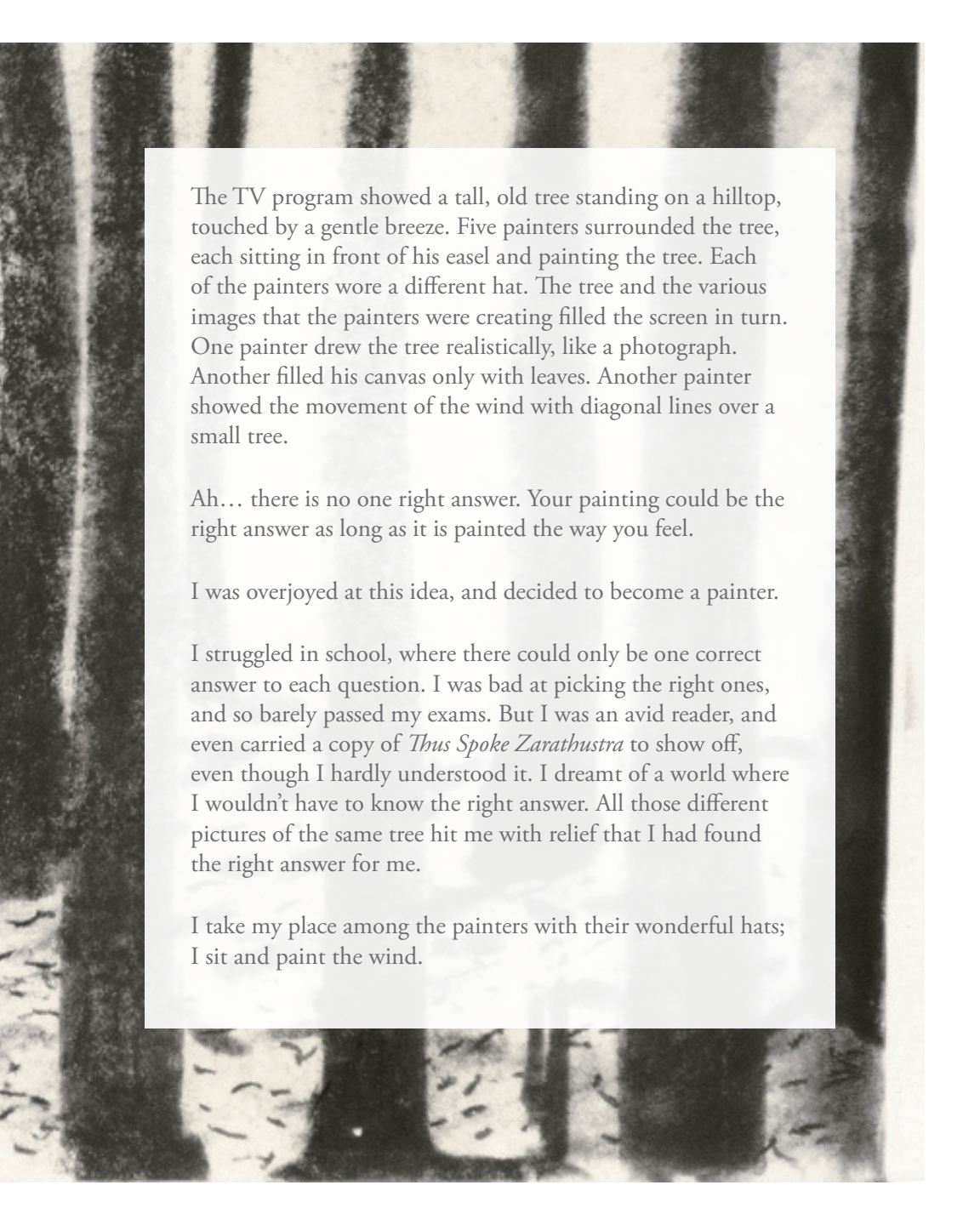
I am often asked why and when I wanted to become an artist.

As a child, I always liked drawing pictures, but every child is a great artist. I am still amazed and grateful that I have been able to continue my childhood play even now. I myself am curious as to why I wanted to be a painter, an artist.

I was in middle school when an American TV show streaming in South Korea opened a door to this path for me.







The TV program showed a tall, old tree standing on a hilltop, touched by a gentle breeze. Five painters surrounded the tree, each sitting in front of his easel and painting the tree. Each of the painters wore a different hat. The tree and the various images that the painters were creating filled the screen in turn. One painter drew the tree realistically, like a photograph. Another filled his canvas only with leaves. Another painter showed the movement of the wind with diagonal lines over a small tree.

Ah... there is no one right answer. Your painting could be the right answer as long as it is painted the way you feel.

I was overjoyed at this idea, and decided to become a painter.

I struggled in school, where there could only be one correct answer to each question. I was bad at picking the right ones, and so barely passed my exams. But I was an avid reader, and even carried a copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to show off, even though I hardly understood it. I dreamt of a world where I wouldn't have to know the right answer. All those different pictures of the same tree hit me with relief that I had found the right answer for me.

I take my place among the painters with their wonderful hats;
I sit and paint the wind.





A Stone Covered with Moss

...

“A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

One of the questions on my college entrance exam asked me to translate and explain the meaning of this old English proverb. It was a question that seemed to determine my destiny.

In the old days, anyone could enter high school easily. Entering college, however, was much more difficult. As a senior at my second-choice high school, I proudly applied for one of the most prestigious universities in Korea, staking the honor of my school. But I failed the college exam. My teachers must have felt sorry for me, as they told me that I had failed by just one point. They might have offered these words of comfort to others who had failed.

A rolling stone and moss—even now I am unsure of the correct meaning of the proverb. It is a matter of whether you prefer the stone covered with moss or the stone that never stops rolling, becoming smooth and clean.

But on exams like these, there can be only one correct answer. In the competition between patience and diligence, I viewed moss as something positive, so I wrote, “Those who endure patiently succeed.” The correct answer, however, was “One should keep moving to be successful.”

When I heard that I had failed the entrance exam by one point, I pictured a stone beautifully covered with moss. I didn’t like that the world approved only one correct answer, when both ideas might have been reasonable. I dreamed and searched hard for a world where the two different ideas could both be accepted. I left to study abroad for my freshman year of college. I was young and fearless.

Whenever I see mossy rocks, I imagine what would have happened if I had entered the university whose entrance exam I failed. I think of my suspicious attitude toward so-called correct answers, and my habit of avoiding those who stubbornly stick to their own answers. I catch myself criticizing others with my own correct answer that, “There is no correct answer.”

Stones shining in the clear brook and stones covered with velvety green moss are both beautiful. What other lesson could there possibly be?





Practice Dreaming



A dream is something we have while we are asleep, whether we want to or not. But a dream can also be something we deeply desire. How is it that we use the same word for such different things?

The dreams I have during my sleep are often unrealistic and fantastical, and when I wake up, they fade away like candlelight in the morning sun. But I enjoy dreams so I look forward to sleeping.

I paint my dreams. All my paintings are dreams. All artists paint, write, and sing their dreams. A dream is not only the world we glimpse while asleep, but the wishes and excitement inside us that we can see when we are awake. So, I paint the treasures that are easily forgotten in our hectic lives, the beauty that loses its voice in the troubles of life.

The key to dreaming is curiosity. Before we lose our health, our vision, or our hair as we age, we first often lose our curiosity. I've met





everyone I care to meet, I've gone everywhere I care to go, there's really nothing new under the sun... If the world has so lost its color, the shadow of death is already stretching before you.

As a painter, I try to maintain my curiosity, the same way I exercise to lose the extra weight around my waist. I always keep at least ten books on my reading list, visit exhibitions even when I don't quite feel like it, walk a different path instead of the one I usually take, copy a beautiful artbook with it held upside down.

Dreaming is also about seeing the invisible more clearly than the visible, and listening for sounds that you cannot hear.

When practicing dreaming, I see the unexpected, the amazing. By dreaming, I see even tough times with the confidence and expectation that even such hardships hide treasures to be discovered.





The Women in Me



Open your door, dear flowers. Bloom for me.
Lightning or tidal waves may be the only path,
But open your door, dear flowers. Bloom for me.

A Monologue at a Flowerbed—Short verses of Saso by Seo Jeong-ju

Saso said this in her garden one early morning, before leaving home and heading to a mountain, accompanied only by a hawk sitting on her shoulder. Saso, the mother of King Hyeokgeose, who founded the Silla Kingdom of ancient Korea, began a new life of solitude. Yet she was determined not to suffer loneliness every day.

Pregnant out of wedlock, Saso was forced to live in a remote place, far from the world. Saso did not sink into darkness, however. Rather, she lifted her ill-fated love to eternity.



In the letters Saso sent to her father, carried by the wings of her hawk, she remained determined to accept and control her life. (It is recorded that Saso and her father wrote to each other, though the content of their correspondence comes from Seo Jeong-ju's imagination. But if he said it, it's to be trusted.)

I have recovered from bleeding

...

To you, my father,
To my dear baby Bulgeonae and his father in hiding,
And to young women of ages to come
I spread veins of gold across the sky.

Excerpt from *Saso's Love and Eternal Life* by Seo Jeong-ju

I met remarkable women through the poet Seo Jeong-ju's collection *Ever-flowing Love and Eternal Life* and his essay *The Poet and the Chrysanthemum*. Lady Saso, Queen Seondeok and Lady Suro of Silla, and the *gisaeng* Hwang Jin-yi.

They are the forebears of my soul, existing in a distant past. I try to take after these free-spirited souls, more open-minded than me even in the modern world of today. I merely imitate their far-reaching strides.

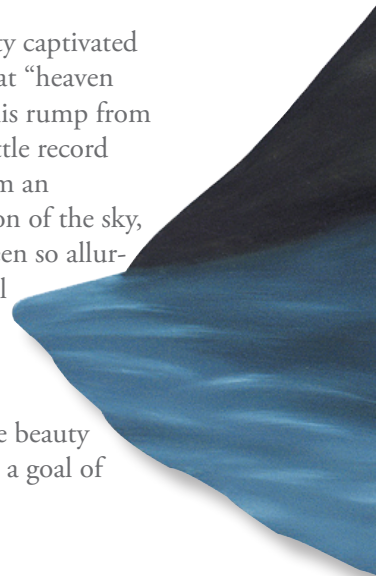
Love must be stronger than the laws of the land.
Women shall rest easy."

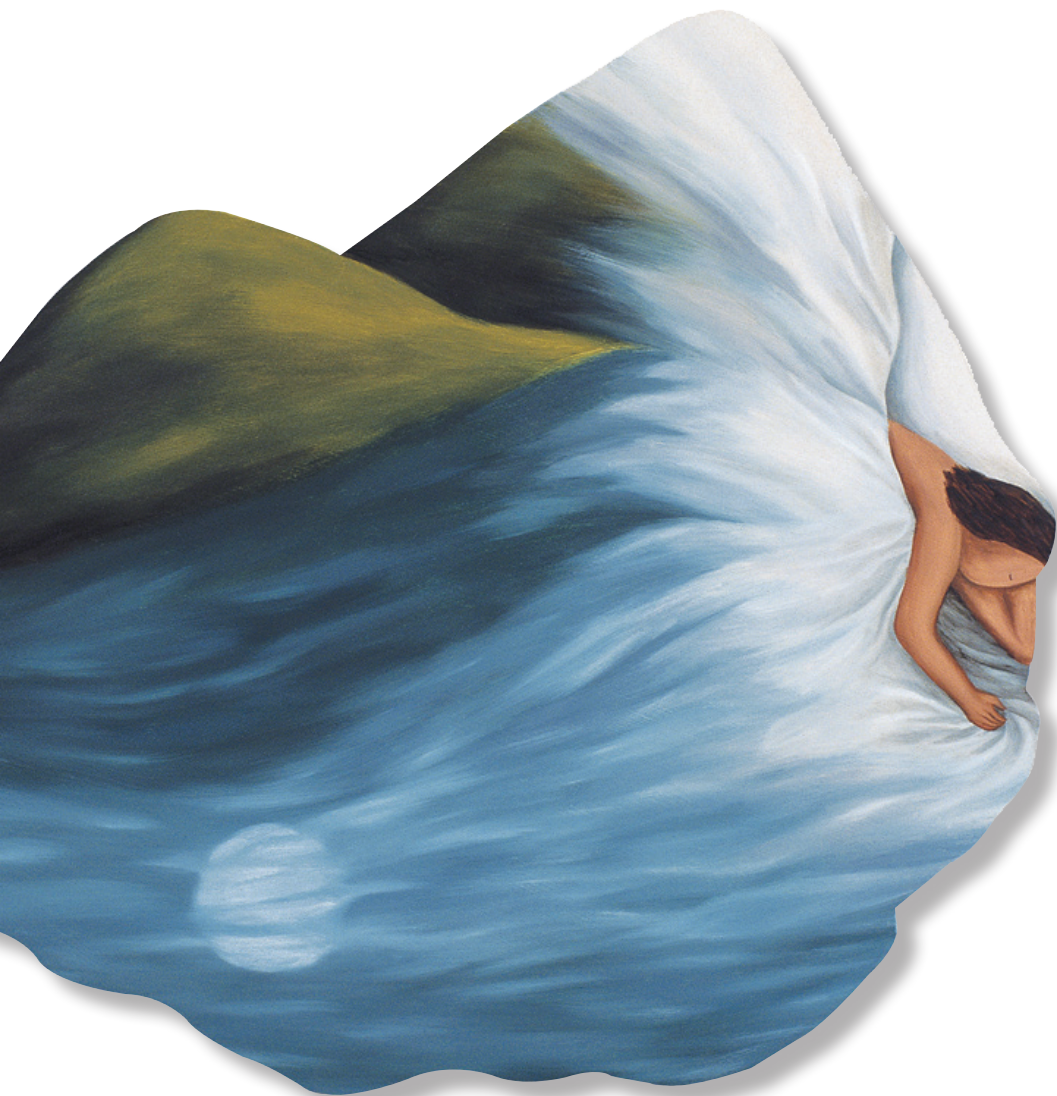
Queen Seondeok, The Lover of Lovers by Seo Jeong-ju

I am inspired by Queen Seondeok of Silla, a lover of lovers and a brave defender of the weak. As a woman of wit and wisdom, she helped a General save his lover, pregnant out of wedlock, from execution by fire. She was gentle and bold enough to smile at an insane man who harbored unrequited love for her. She gave her own bracelet to him, and told him, "I regret that I cannot give myself to you, but take this instead." She is every bit a heroine, a sister to look up to.

Lady Suro is another one of my heroines. Her beauty captivated Taoist hermits, and even a sea dragon. Seo wrote that "heaven recognized her beauty" while her husband "fell on his rump from shock at her sheer beauty." Though there remains little record of her, I believe that, without the depth derived from an inner beauty, she would not have drawn the attention of the sky, the sea, and the land. Lady Suro was said to have been so alluring that, when a sea dragon took her into the sea, all the villagers came out to the beach and hit the sand dunes with sticks, crying, "Return Our Lady Suro!"

A picture of Lady Suro hangs by my mirror. Because beauty comes from the core of the soul, and Lady Suro sets a goal of womanly beauty to aspire to.









Hwang Jin-yi is also an intimate companion. This gisaeng who wandered like a blue stream centuries ago loved her life deeply, appreciating it while also keeping a distance from it.

Her solitude was essential to her relationships. I think of how she reigned over her lovers, leisurely reciting an enticing poem to an arrogant man while sitting high on a horse. I also see her beauty when she crossed the mountains to take care of her lover, and then depart after the three years they promised to be together came to an end. She was a strong, independent soul. She held her life in her own hands.

Some might ask me why my heroines are a pregnant girl, a naïve queen, a stunning beauty to whom I could not dare to compare myself, and a wandering courtesan. My answer is that these women knew how to live with everlasting and endless love.

They had the creativity to accept life as it was given to them, while refusing to be a slave to it. Their wisdom and compassion saw all faces of reality. Their courage enabled them to love and enjoy life beautifully.

How could I not love these women who walked ahead of me? All I can do is follow them with delight.



From the River



Each morning after I eat breakfast and clean up, I go into my studio.

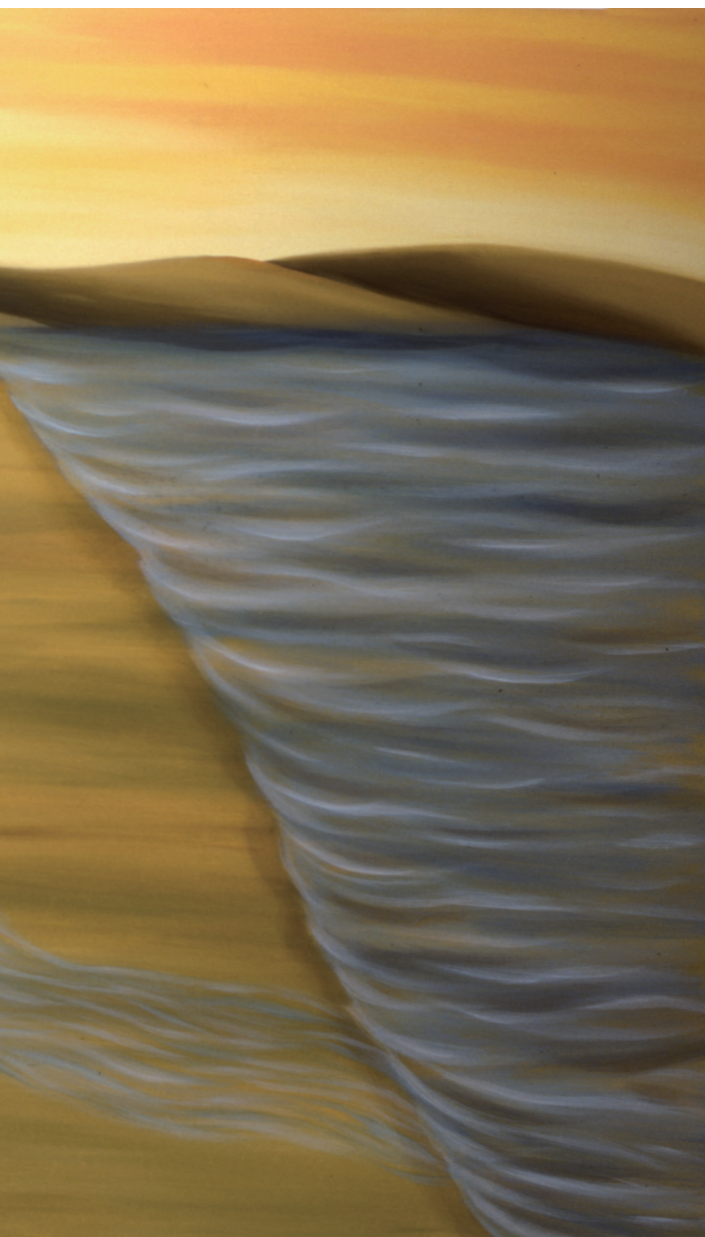
Looking at the paintings that I worked on yesterday, I sit down to work. I begin my sketches, thinking of the strange country I encountered in the prior night's dream and the dances I read about in Rumi's poetry. I think of these as I redraw the images I drew yesterday.

I paint these images and colors from the river. Even turbulent images become calm and quiet in my art.

As I move on to my next paintings, the sun sets, casting a beautiful sunset over the river. I paint every day, all day long. I am truly a blessed one.









A Gift of Forty Days

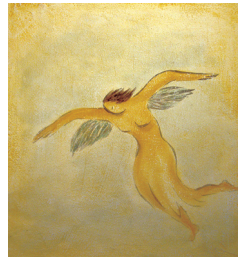
...

A few years ago a dear friend of mine gave me a book by Hafiz, a Persian poet from the 14th century. The collection of poems was called *The Gift*.

I paused at the title on the book's cover. I was going through a turbulent time; my life felt dark, and I had put my head down in despair. The title of the book felt like a comforting answer, gently turning my head up. It quietly reminded me that everything in life was a gift—no matter how easy, difficult, joyous, or painful—and that I should be grateful for it all. Reading Hafiz's poetry made my life brighter and put new wings under my arms.

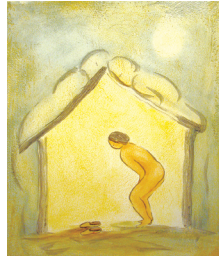
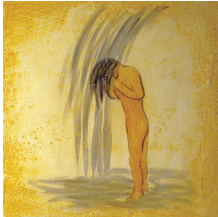
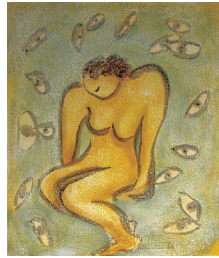
Born the son of a peasant, Hafiz worked in a bakery as a young boy, delivering bread every morning. On his deliveries to one nobleman's house, Hafiz would always leave the bread at the gate. One





day, the gate was open, and he happened to glimpse the nobleman's daughter from afar. Entranced by her beauty, he began to perform a forty-day prayer by a saint's grave, as was a custom at the time. With the innocent desperation of a young boy, he prayed that he might see her again, though he had no idea what he would do if she did appear.

After the forty-day vigil of fasting and prayer, an angel suddenly came to him, and asked, "So, what is it that you're praying so hard for?"



The moment Hafiz saw the bright face of the angel, he forgot all about the girl. “If you are so radiant, I can’t imagine how beautiful the one who sent you must be. Please take me to him. My wish is to meet him.” The angel took him to a Sufi master called Rumi and the boy became his pupil.

Each poem was a painting, and I drew on each page. Like Hafiz’s forty days of prayer, I painted forty paintings called “Forty Days.”

The number forty symbolizes perseverance. Creating these forty



paintings was like turning love in its abstract form as the subject of our souls into human Eros. Our lives are limited by our bodies, but I felt that even the love abundant in the universe could be conveyed as Eros through images of the body. I painted moments into dances, invisible ones into the wind and angels. This Persian poet, Hafiz, wrote a love letter hundreds of years ago. It was passionate enough to lift me up and dance in delightful joy.



Talking a Bird Out of a Tree



They say that people who are good talkers can talk a bird down from a tree. I often hear people say this about me, but this makes me clam up, since I wonder whether they think that I talk too much.

It's been almost forty years since I've left my homeland. I often see Korean-Americans growing silent, having lost their mother tongue and having no English language skills to replace it. Words grow richer and more plentiful the more they are used. The fewer words a person uses, the plainer their lives and inner worlds become.

I used to be happy when I was told that I spoke "good English" for someone who came to the United States as an adult. But now, I prefer to be told that I speak good Korean for someone who left home so long ago. Besides reading and writing in Korean, I actually do mental language exercises, like "using three adjectives before a noun and three adverbs before a verb." The more richly descriptive I can be, the more intensely I can see.



Although I may chatter noisily enough to talk a bird out of a tree, my painting of the subject is serene. The birds and trees are quieter than the woman in the picture. The river flowing in the background is as hushed as the green hill in the front. I titled this painting, *Plant a Tree to See a Bird*, because I know that patience does not come as easily to me as silence.



Playing Magic



A young daughter of a poet asked her father, “Why did you become a poet?”

With a gleam in his eyes, as if he had been waiting a long time for the day when she would ask this question, the poet answered:

“I was seven years old. On my way home from school one grey, cloudy day, the sun came out from behind the clouds and suddenly lit up the world and made the field I was walking by dazzle with brilliance. As I was watching this scene in wonder, a pretty bird came to rest on my shoulder. The bird also watched in silence the field bathed in golden light. So I opened my arms wide and stood still like a tree, so the bird would not fly away. Looking now through the eyes of a tree, the world gleamed even more brilliantly and beautifully. When I finally came home, my mother scolded me for being late. Though I tried to explain what I saw in the field, my mother wouldn't let me finish, and only became angrier. She told me

there would be no supper for me if I was late again. I knew then that my words had not been enough to deliver my beautiful memory to my mother. So, I decided to become a poet to share what I see with others.”

I try to paint what my eyes and mind see, and as I do, I come to paint invisible things that I had never even imagined. It's a wonderful game of magic that I am still immersed in.



Flying Dreams



I have always loved dreams. I often go to bed excited by wondering what kind of dream I will have that night.

My favorite dreams are flying dreams--when I fly about filled with fear and excitement. Curiously, when I have these dreams, I know that I am dreaming, and I find myself hoping I won't wake up so I can continue flying around.

My nightmares take me back to school again. The teacher hands out an exam, and even worse, a math exam. Though I try to protest, saying, "No, no--there's been a mistake, no exam today," no one—including myself—can hear my voice. I shout and yell, but it is useless. To complicate matters, I am half naked. These dreams are the kind that need no interpretation.

Now back to good dreams. Up, up, and away! In order to start flying, I follow a strict procedure. I have to get a running start, and





then leap--jumping up, or down from a high place. With the wind in my hair and thrilled by the scenery passing beneath me, I sometimes shout and wake myself up.

Once, I lost a key that a friend asked me to keep. After searching in vain for the key all over the house, I fell asleep, exhausted. In my dream, I flew around the house, and saw the key on top of a shelf. When I woke up, I went up to the shelf, and there it was! We are such stuff as dreams are made of, indeed.

There is a story about a Buddhist monk, who, disappointed by the world, jumped off a cliff, which he immediately regretted doing. Seeing this, Buddha took pity on him and placed a large lotus on the water to save the desperate monk, giving him another chance at life.. The monk went onto become a great figure in Buddhist history.

The woman in the painting jumps off the cliff with confidence, believing that she will soar as she falls, knowing that what she sees now is not the entire picture. She jumps off not because she is hopeless, but because she wants to go higher. The way up is the way down. She must fall first in order to fly up. I envy her faith.

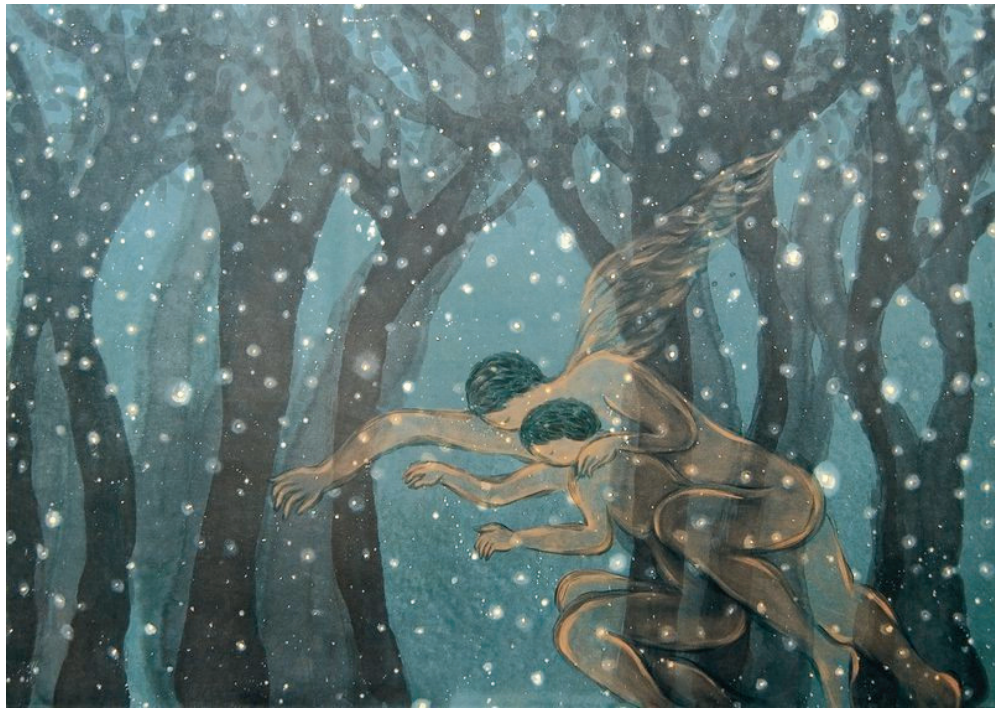
Forest Scenes



My sister Wonmi was preparing Robert Schumann's *Forest Scenes* for a piano recital. As she practiced the piece, I began my own practice as well. The piece grew all the more fascinating as I listened. As I listened to her play the nine short pieces, the music became all the more fascinating. Each piece drew a different scene and filled my head with countless images.

So I started painting the images inspired by the music on large canvases, with the idea of placing them behind the piano like a folding screen.

I painted the deep forest with its mysterious colors and movements, and even images I imagined of Schumann dancing behind the piano as I touched my sister's fingers. In some places, the trees are upside down. The moonlight shines through the leaves that turn in the wind, and a stream flows down, as Schumann's soul flies among the stars in the form of a bird. I thought a lot about Schumann, who was sent to a mental hospital after composing this piece. He spent the rest of his life there until his lonely, painful death.



It is so easy to lose oneself in this rhythm of play, where Heinrich Laube's verses are recreated in Schumann's music, and the melodies turn into images and another poet is inspired by them. But at what point did Schumann go so far that he spent his last days in pain? How could this pleasure become a sickness that ends in misery? I ached, thinking of the musical magician Schumann, who suffered the depths of despair...and of his dear wife Clara.

I left my studio to do laundry. Only after I hung out the laundry in the fall sunshine did I feel calmer. Oftentimes, the most mundane routines, like hanging laundry or washing dishes, bring me peace. I wonder, if Schumann had some laundry to take care of, would he have found the time to look into the fall sky and return to his magical play?





Flowing to Happiness



My paintings are by-products of life. They record life's songs and complaints. Painting is a simple engagement for me: I generally stay away from the grand themes of the older masters, like creation, death, or the order of the universe.

Thanks to my sister, a violinist at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, I often enjoy free concerts. One of them was *The Creation* by Joseph Haydn. The music performed by the large choir and the orchestra made such a deep and direct impression that only music can deliver. At the time, my sister had just lost her husband to cancer, and I saw the world through a window of death.

Even the theme of creation seemed to be about death. From the idea that all living things come from dust and return to dust upon death, it seemed that creation and death were one and the same. The logic of creation and death was so simple and intimate, and there for all to see. In the darkness of the concert hall, I fumbled in my bag for a pencil and drew a scene of creation and death.

Though my sister was inconsolable, I prepared a large canvas and began to paint an ambitious, larger-than-life scene for her. Her husband, a man who had been healthy until what seemed like just the day before, suddenly had to use a cane, as cancer spread to his bones. Then one morning, he let go of his cane and lay down forever. I painted his death, his return to dust and to the beyond. Behind him, an endless river flows quietly before ranges of mountains. I even dared to paint the spirit of Providence over the world. Having painted this grand picture in just a few strokes, I wept alone in front of it for some time.

Later, I painted a lone boat drifting on the river of life. As I grow older, I see that there is a clear current that flows within our lives. Whether we swim with or against the current, whether we kick furiously or flounder, the river goes forward all the same. Now, I think I understand this great current a little bit better. I was the boat, drifting. I should have floated with the stream, enjoying the scenery of the water and the moon. I learned precious lessons on the river, so I painted myself scooping up the river water into a jar.

When I sent this painting to Mr. JuHun Lee, who was curating an exhibition of paintings for me at the time, he suggested the insightful title, “Flowing to Happiness.” I was grateful that he captured the essence of my painting even better than I could.

In the bustle of constant vexations and anxieties, I have been striving to accept and surrender to the river of life. I loosen my clenched fists and relax my strained eyes, and try to drift towards happiness.





A True Audience



When I held the exhibition titled “Flowing to Happiness,” Korea was going through political turmoil and the streets of Seoul were overflowing with tears induced by tear gas. It was an unsettling time to hold an exhibition. Various visitors came, some wiping tears from their stinging eyes. These visitors were all precious to me, but one office worker still remains clear in my memory—a man with a tired look and an empty briefcase under his arm.

Entering the gallery rather timidly, he looked closely at each painting, sometimes standing at attention with a focused look in front of one. After some time, he took out a thin wallet to buy a copy of the exhibition catalog. It was a truly wonderful sight to see him leave the hall with the catalog. Perhaps he had a wife who would look through the catalog with him, listening to his thoughts on each piece, rather than criticizing his purchase as a waste.

I sincerely hoped that my paintings lent more happiness than the cost of my art catalog.

When people approach me, they often start by saying, “I don’t know much about art, but...” It’s such a shame that the arrogant



elitism of modern art has made an intelligent, healthy audience lose their confidence. It reminds me of the village people from the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, who had to praise their naked king. They try to see art through their ears, not their eyes; they should simply follow their gut feelings.

Once we try to see paintings based on what we are told, we miss out on the joy of art. It should be the same as when we tune in to the radio and listen to whatever music we happen to enjoy, without worrying about being an expert on it. Despite the apologetic things many say when they first address me, the truth is that the opinions of the audience are often the most insightful comments, helping me see things I never considered.



Section IV

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Tomorrow, mountain after mountain

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A Statue for Kiara



On the opening night of one of my exhibitions in Italy, I saw a beautiful woman lingering in front of one of my sculptures. As I approached her, I noticed that she was weeping bitterly. I cry easily, and I often cry at the sight of someone crying. So, when I saw her, I started crying with her for some time. After a while, I asked her why we were crying.

She told me that her cousin and best friend Kiara took her own life recently, and the sculpture looked and felt strikingly like her. After this conversation, Kiara's parents contacted me, saying that they would really like to buy the statue.

Kiara's story is a sad one of a pretty young girl who lived in a small town to the south of Venice called Budrio. At 33, she was an architect, but after an ill-fated love affair that left her broken-hearted and suffering from depression, she took her own life. Her parents' sadness upon losing their only child was beyond words, but another bitterness lay in wait for them. The residents of the small Catholic town shunned Kiara's parents, since suicide was considered a

cardinal sin, and even their close friends who chatted with them everyday in the park would leave when they entered it. Making their suffering worse, the villagers objected to burying Kiara in the local churchyard, so the parents buried their daughter in a grave they had prepared for themselves.

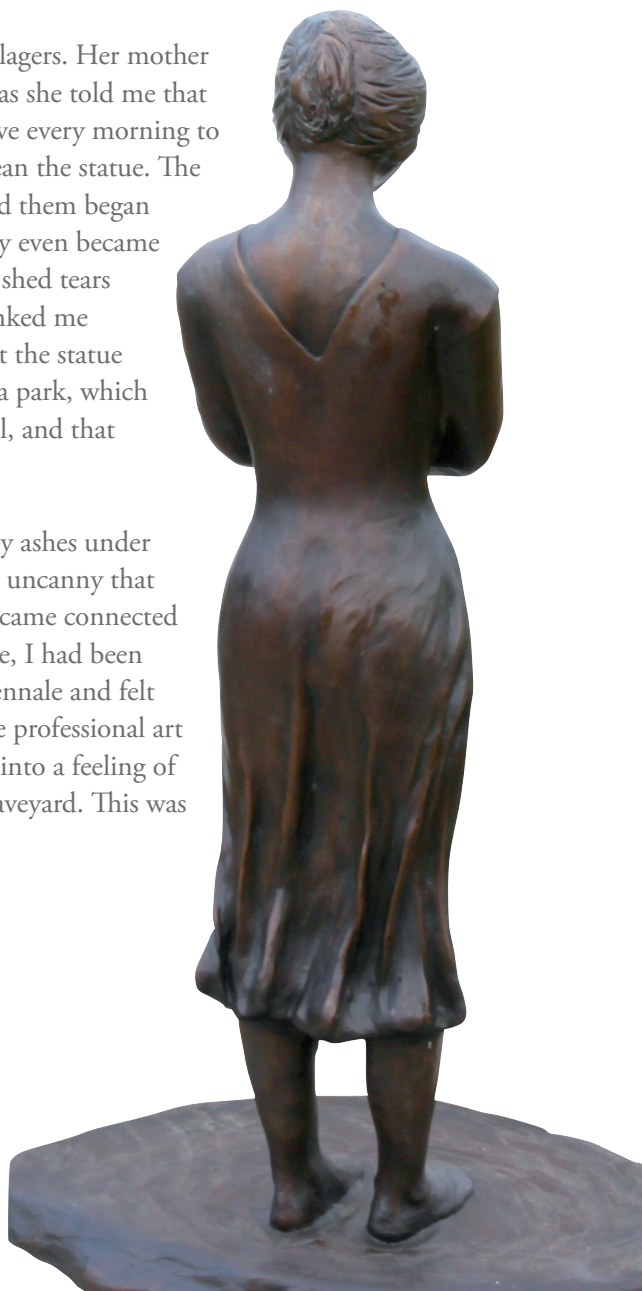
When Kiara's parents asked permission to place my statue at the grave, they faced even greater opposition. It seemed that churches under Vatican jurisdiction would not accept their request because of the nature of Kiara's death; the fact that the statue was made by a non-Catholic Korean woman only strengthened their opposition. The parents continued to plead, but the request was not granted.

Then one night, I jumped out of my bed and shouted, "That's it!" and started fumbling through my photo album. About twenty years earlier, I had been invited to the Vatican, and had taken a photo with the Pope as he held one of my paintings. Since it had been taken so long ago, before computers and digital cameras, I had to search high and low, and eventually poured out old photos from a shoebox onto the floor before finding the one I needed. I scanned it and sent it to Kiara's cousin. Within a few days, her family received approval from the authorities.

In the end, my statue was placed at Kiara's grave. Her parents invited me to Italy to see it. I visited her grave in the beautiful small town

and met her family and the villagers. Her mother would not let go of my hands as she told me that she came to her daughter's grave every morning to take care of the flowers and clean the statue. The townspeople who used to avoid them began talking to them again, and they even became thankful for the statue. As she shed tears constantly, Kiara's mother thanked me countless times, telling me that the statue made the graveyard more like a park, which the villagers appreciated as well, and that now, Kiara rested in peace.

I asked my children to bury my ashes under this statue when I die. I find it uncanny that somehow death and beauty became connected through art. Just the day before, I had been walking around the Venice Biennale and felt an unsettling dismay about the professional art world, but that unease turned into a feeling of warmth in this countryside graveyard. This was where my art belonged.





A Magic Jar



My children, husband and me, three in all.
House chores, making a living and painting, three in all.
The realms of heaven, earth and dreams, three in all.

I had no time to see where my jar was leaking, or how much water was left inside it. I was too busy filling the jar to the brim in order to survive.

The water from the jar, no longer just leaking, but pouring out like a waterfall.

With cracked holes and all, the sturdy jar is my youth. I feared the day my jar would be empty, which is why I always painted it full and overflowing with water.

That was my earnest prayer of those days.





On a Tightrope



It was before the time of Google, and I was frustrated after an argument with my husband, an argument that started from something trivial, as always. Out of all this, I suddenly wanted to know how many men there were on earth.

I called the New York Public Library. After hearing my question, the clerk hesitated, repeated my inquiry, then told me to wait. After a while, she gave me a long number.

Ah, why am I with this man, when there are as many out there as grains of sand? Besides, our lives are like grass in the field, blooming only for a few days...

I struggled to put things in perspective, yet still felt hopeless. Even though there were billions of people living on Earth, this one man was at the center of my universe.

Those days were like walking on a tightrope over a river, peaceful and quiet, but dangerous. We lived on a tightrope: one end said that it was okay for us to both be right, as we saw and felt things differently, but the other end told us there is only one correct way. Even

as we tried to maintain a balance, what I wanted more was just to enjoy the cool night breeze. Our tightrope act was not an easy one.

The house with warm windows at the back is a dream shared by both. But since the way each sees to the house is as different as the meanings of “backward” and “forward,” the two look like people who have left paradise behind.

I painted a life where there is peace in danger, stability in conflict, warmth in loneliness, and tranquility in turbulence.

In any case, I’m still unsure of what made me call the library.



The Muddy Road



As a child, I lived in a village on top of a hill, the kind of village that no longer exists nowadays. Whenever it rained, the alleyway to my house turned into a muddy mess.

Our school required that we wear white sneakers with our uniform, and on rainy days, I always worried about making it through the muddy alley. But as I got closer, I would see a way through. There might be big stones, an apple crate, and other discarded debris lying around that I could use as stepping stones. Using these, I would pass through the alley without ruining my shoes. After crossing, my clean white shoes would seem like a miracle, every time.

Even now, when I'm in a difficult situation, I think of the muddy alley. A river might look impossible to cross from afar, but I know that there will be a way once I get down to the riverbank. I even feel excited when anticipating the next river, and think, "How is this going to work out this time?"





Unchanging Change



Trees that were once bundles of dry sticks are now covered with the splendid colors of spring. But they have nothing to do with me. Their colors are blinding to me, dizzying with their frivolity. The trees look awkward, as if they were a person trying on fashionable clothing for the first time. I used to be overwhelmed each spring by this miraculous festival, but this year, it feels like meaningless repetition.

The first letter my father wrote to me when I came to America decades ago began with: “Unchanging you amid the changes about you.” The spring trees look different each year, although they wear the same face. Yet the splendor of spring did not melt away my coldness. No matter how beautiful and graceful my mother’s death was, as I was told, my world turned dark, my heart heavy with regrets. Friends and family sent me messages, telling me: “It’s no use wallowing in regret,” and, “We have to overcome this by looking up at heaven with prayer and faith.” To quiet these well-meaning efforts

at comfort, I turned off my cellphone. While heroes declare, “There is no regret in my life,” I am full of regret.

I painted a magical moment: a woman holds dry branches, covered in snow. Towards the end of each branch, the snow turns into white flowers, brightening the world. Perhaps the melted snow soaked the dry branches and awoke the white flowers asleep inside. And finally, the white flowers speak to me: “Who do you think you are?”

How could you stop me from blooming?”





The Morning Window



“Ah, today is a good day.”

My husband says this almost every morning when he wakes up.

“Why?” I ask him.

“It’s Thursday, garbage day! You take out everything that’s dirty and *poof* it’s gone. It’s a miracle!”

“What?”

“Think about it. Would you take away someone else’s trash, even for money?”

Yesterday was also a good day because it rained, and so was the day before yesterday, because he could sleep in. Every day is a great day for him.

Since my mother’s funeral, it seems that everything and everyone simply leads to death. My loved ones, great figures of the past,



wonderful artists: they all die. They might leave works and stories behind, but so what?

I read my favorite stories, the Book of Ecclesiastes. It agrees that every day is a good day.

Gratitude is a considered choice. It goes beyond just emptying your mind. It requires choosing to fill the emptiness with light, however slight the source.

I told my husband that he was making a big deal out of nothing, just a garbage truck that comes every week, but seeing the empty bin in the evening, I made my decision: tomorrow morning, I would be the one to make the day bright.

Thirst



It has already been one year since my mother passed away.

Or rather, it has only been one year. Time seems both long and short as I drifted about my life. It was as if I looked but could not see, ate but was always empty, and slept with my eyes wide open. Being a motherless child may be part of becoming an adult, but it is a joyless and lonely thing.

Missing someone feels like an unquenchable thirst. I painted a woman standing before a waterfall, drinking and drinking from its waters yet still thirsty. They say one should let go, but I don't know what that means, only that it's absurdly painful.

I would rather quench my thirst with a promise, satiate my hunger with gratitude, and fill my longing for Mother with the beautiful stories she left behind. These things overflow and pour down like a waterfall; I will drink until I become complete.





Dust to Light



On my way up the mountain where my mother is buried for the second anniversary of her death, flower petals scattered by the wind fill the world with white dots. The days that I managed without her have passed like snowflakes in the wind. With spring here, it is white everywhere again, with falling cherry blossoms and floating dandelion seeds.

Since Mother's passing, I often see images that are scattered, drifting and broken into pieces. They do not disappear or fade away, but rather move to a wider world, transforming into light to brighten the sky.

My head is far too full of tiny, drifting dots to draw a clear line. Together, they might form something else, but for now, dots are all I can paint.



Dust to Light

Burning Flowers

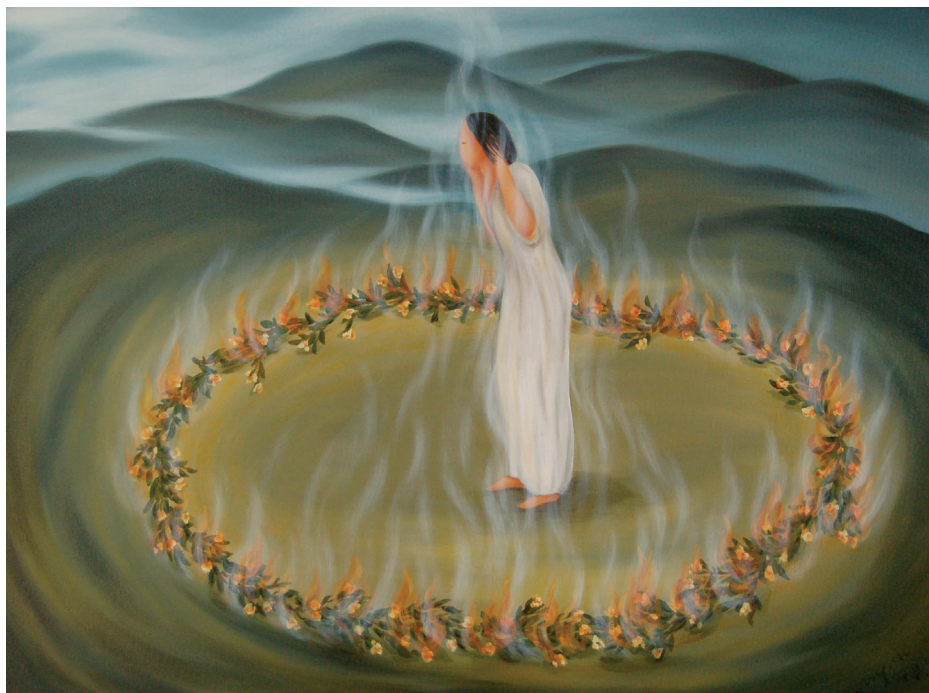


Carrying flowers that I raised with care and cut, I climb a mountain. The higher I climb, the harder it is to breathe. The landscape beneath me seems to change every few seconds. The houses, villages, and even my fear become smaller. The world at the bottom of the mountain is as beautiful and vain as the flowers in my arms.

I place the flowers in a small circle on the ground, and stand inside it with empty hands. Then, I light a fire and burn the flowers. As the joy and pain of the past burn away, I see another world in the smoke.

When I read about this healing ritual that originated from the Incan civilization, the image of burning flowers caught my eyes. Though precious, should we take them away and burn them to go forward?







Edge of a Cliff



Since I wasn't getting any younger, I gave in to my friends' advice and went to the doctor for a comprehensive check-up. The hospital used horrifying machines to poke and prod my body. When the doctor told me that they would have to run a few more tests before they could give me the final report, I felt weak in my knees, and thought, "Ah! Finally, here comes the bad news." Suddenly, I felt relieved that my children were grown. It felt like standing at a cliff's edge.

When I walked out of the hospital, the world looked uncommonly bright: the sky was perfectly blue, and the clouds were a fluffy white, almost bursting with brightness. The grass and trees were a vivid green, and birds chirped ever more loudly. Suddenly, I felt so alive.

Years ago, on a backpacking trip in one of the Colorado National Parks, we pitched a tent in the dim light of a flashlight. We had been



looking for a place to set up camp until very late, and finally found some smooth grassland just a short distance away. The next morning, we found we had pitched our tent at the edge of a steep cliff.

After running around in the dark thinking we were on a plain, we had arrived at a place where we could see the bottom of the cliff. “I live in calm, looking to the end,” “The readiness is all”-- I’ve heard of many thought-provoking expressions about living with a view towards death, but we cannot prepare for death while we are alive. Living with death is simply living.

My uneventful check-up was a timely reminder. The windows of my mind had been cleaned, if only for a while.

Jonah's Gourd

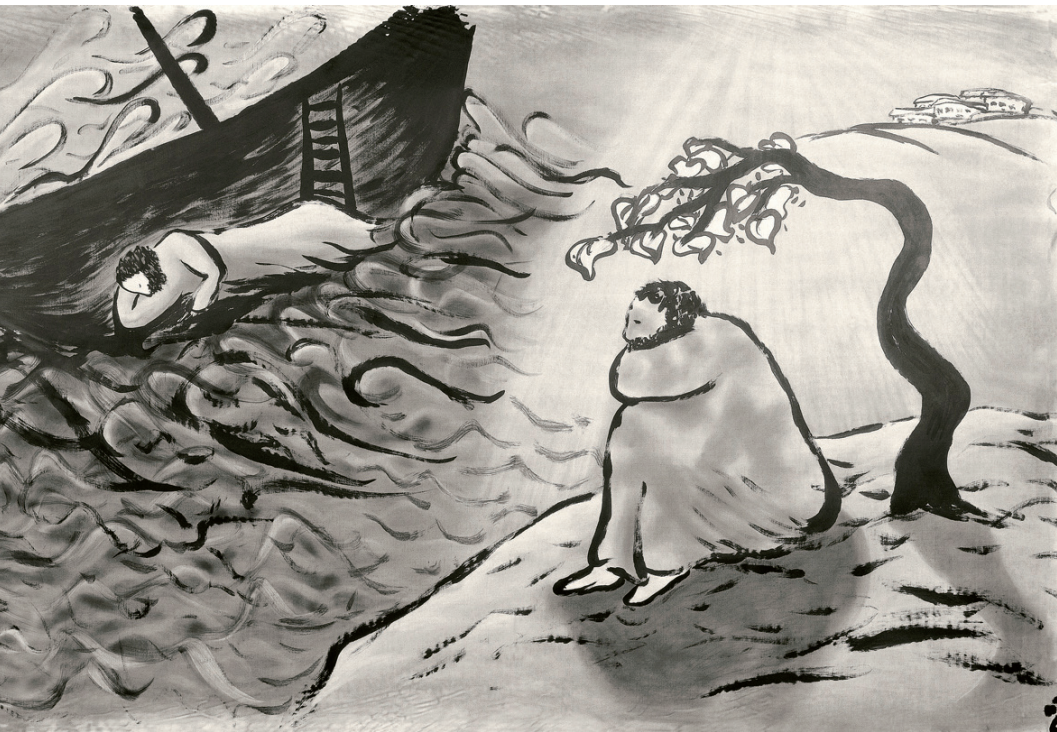


Jonah was a stubborn, complicated prophet from the Old Testament. Fleeing from a command of God's that he did not want to obey, Jonah found himself swallowed up in the belly of a giant fish. My favorite part of the Book of Jonah is the last scene.

Since he had no other choice, and he had made a vow to God while inside the fish, . Jonah went to his enemies in Nineveh and delivered God's warning that the city would be destroyed in forty days. Though Jonah expected them to flout the warning, the people of Nineveh repented immediately, and the merciful Lord withheld His judgment upon them. Seeing God's change of heart, Jonah walked to the top of a hill overlooking the city and seethed with anger. In the heat of the sun, Jonah protested that he would rather die. God consoled him by growing a leafy gourd plant to cast shade over his head, but the very next day He made the plant wither away, and demanded: Who are you to think that you have the right to be angry at me?

Like Jonah, running away from a command he cannot make sense of and falling into a deep sleep in the ship's cabin below, I am also asleep. I often choose to fall into a deep slumber rather than face the conflicts set in front of me.





For me, it's easier to hurry around in the churchyard performing ceremonies than to give myself fully to God as His servant. When will this end? When we become indifferent, irresponsible, and stop caring, we live a "living death."



The Widow's Oil



Having come to her wit's end, a widow cried out to a prophet. Her beloved husband had died, and moneylenders were on their way to take her two sons away as slaves. The widow begged the prophet Elisha to help them. Elisha asked her how he could help, and what she had in her house. She told him, "I have nothing, except a little jar of oil." The prophet told her to borrow empty vessels from her neighbors, lock the door after bringing them home, and fill the vessels from her jar of oil. The woman collected the vessels and began pouring oil from her jar. The oil continued to flow from the jar until every vessel was filled. She sold the oil and overcame her predicament.

The widow found a way out of her plight by maintaining faith, taking action without doubt.



Once, a good friend told me that I had the ability to enjoy happiness. I hung onto that flattering compliment, not knowing what it really meant.

But what exactly is the ability to enjoy happiness? I think it is the faith that one needs to be able to place humble vessels borrowed from others in front of an almost empty jar of oil. It is a willingness to turn the grace we receive into action, and acceptance that we can fill only as many vessels as we have prepared.



Stories of Shadows



Shadows are images cast only when there is a clear and bright light. Even when we cannot see an object itself because of the dazzling light, its shadow is sharp and clear. If “words” are objects, “shadows” would be the silence between the words, the emotions that speak between people, and the resonance of souls. Although its shape may differ slightly from the actual object, a shadow is true to the original form, and more sharply defined. Shadows can convey feelings more directly. When I paint shadows, I talk about the things that cannot be seen but are all the more heartfelt for being unseen.

A woman walks through a desert, holding a bowl filled with the water of life. Her shadow holds something that cannot be spilled: an eternal book of life. Her shadow over the dry wilderness carries vitality in its coolness. A black bird flies over her head, but there is no shadow for things that fly away or disappear.

I also painted a man with two shadows, a man of two minds. He wants everything, wanting to be in two places at the same time. So he goes nowhere, stuck standing still.





The shadow of a tree swaying in the strong wind is the silhouette of a dancing woman. The tree is shaken alive by the wind, and seems more alive than the stooped woman. The tree invites her to join its dance.

I also painted a picture of comfort, where a sad woman is embraced and comforted by her own shadow. Although it can feel somewhat foolish to comfort oneself, it is a necessary generosity, as we can also be our own worst enemies. Comfort from a best friend and an enemy, a paradoxical, yet heartwarming act. I wanted to express that we cannot love others unless we love ourselves.

The shadow of a woman hesitating on a windy road shows the courage to live even while facing the wind. Though faltering from fear and anxiety, the shadow of the woman shows her determination not to be silent even when words fail, her courage to love again with all her might even when love has hurt her, and her desire to get back up even when life has knocked her down.

Words and silence, light and shadow, reality and illusion. Life, this constant duality, fluttering between the mysterious and the wonderful.







Stories of Shadows



The Higher You Climb, the More You See



The filmmaker Ingmar Bergman once said in an interview, “Old age is like climbing a mountain. The higher you go, the more tired and breathless you become, but you see a world you did not see at the bottom. So you forget about your sore legs in anticipation of going higher and seeing new sights.”

During my youth, when I didn’t know that I was climbing a mountain and had no idea what it was like to be tired, I painted countless images inspired by Bergman’s films. The films were like precious photo books of connected, still images rather than motion pictures. I would watch the same movie several times, filling my sketchbook. I can still remember the excitement I felt turning his movie into my own paintings.

But that’s a time I cannot go back to.

In the last chapter of *Till We Have Faces*, C.S. Lewis uses a metaphor to describe the descent to the deepest center of our lives.

The metaphor of going up or down is about our perspective, vision, and movement.

Though there is no summit to climb to, nor a core to descend to, moving toward a goal is a blessing granted to the living. So we move toward the light.



Till We Have Faces



Till We Have Faces is not one of C. S. Lewis' well-known books, but it is one of my favorites and a classic in my eyes. It depicts the different phases of life with a serene voice.

The book retells the Cupid and Psyche story from Greek mythology as a story about a goddess as beautiful as Aphrodite and her ugly sister, a Queen who lives her entire life under a veil to hide her ugliness.

The story deals with various types of love among gods and humans, and explores how we love, and how we hurt others in the name of love. It is also about our knowledge and faith concerning both the visible and invisible worlds. In the book, Lewis suggests that human logic and knowledge emerge from Greek thought, while faith is the wisdom that humans acquire by accepting the existence of God.

When I first read the book, each page came to life, full of images. By the time I reached the last page, I had created more than two hundred sketches of hope, love, despair, and yearning.





As I painted them, the souls within the book came to life and transformed into other figures who touched me to the depths of my being. Even now, those images continue to give birth to new paintings. This book has become an ever-renewing source of inspiration, like an overflowing spring.

Lewis's story begins with an aged Queen's dying words as she looks back at her life behind the veil.

"I am old now. I am not afraid of curses from any god or the rage of a human being. Now free from fear, I will speak what no one who fears the loss of happiness would dare to speak."

She starts by calmly denouncing all the gods for overlooking the absurdity and paradox of life, and reveals her grievances about their unjust attitude towards human life. The old Queen then narrates, in chilling detail, the story of her desperate life, of all the sorrow, unrealized love, despair, and longing.

When she is finished, the world suddenly becomes bright and silent. After a while, a voice is heard asking, "Did you hear the answer? Do you understand now?"

Without a thread of clothing, the Queen had been standing at the altar and reading the complaints that she had written down throughout her life. But at that moment, she feels the answer with all her body, heart, and soul. She replies, "Yes, I know now."



She learns that the very act of complaining, supposing that there is someone to complain to, and protesting that something is unjust, demonstrates that we recognize the existence of higher beings and accept our position in life.

Though we were not born with a promise that life would be beautiful, happy, and just, we become outraged and resentful when we encounter misfortune and despair in life, as if we were somehow cheated. But this only shows that we are created by God to long for eternity and crave justice and beauty. The Queen realizes that her complaint is the very answer she had been looking for.

I painted the Queen standing on the altar of judgment, naked in front of her people, reading out her complaints about life.

I too complain because I want more, rather than being grateful for the overflowing blessings and the beauty of the universe that I get to enjoy every day. Maybe now I am somewhat closer to the answer, painting what is eternal, beautiful, and lovely within my complaint.

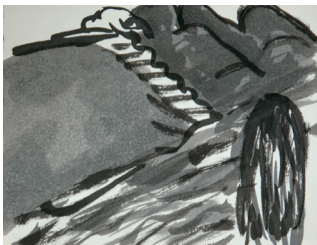
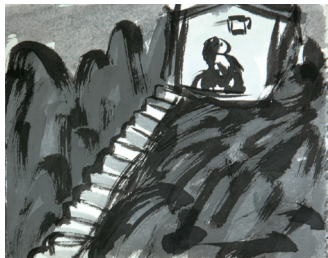
When the Queen says that now she knows the answer, God asks her, "Then do you wish for a fair, just judgement?" She replies, "No, what I wish for is neither the justice of reaping what I deserve, nor a fair trial. I wish for infinite forgiveness, unconditional and endless love."

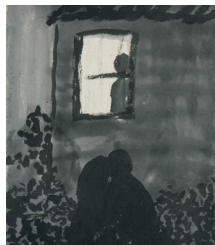
God shows her vivid visions in place of His judgement. Human beings abusing others in the name of love, the water of life that can only be obtained by descending into the bottomless abyss, human beings eternally wandering the desert while crying and holding a book full of complaints, and a black bird of death flying above.

She then dies in peace and serenity.

The woman in the book and the stories of love and suffering are all within me. They are my stories too.







Till We Have Faces

Glossary of Images with names and dates

