

Sunny Day, Spring

Also by Gail Sher

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Gail Sher



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for Brendan

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The Slowness of Rain

UNN, HEAD BOWED, SHOULDERS SLIGHTLY
SLUMPED, sat, book in lap, in a stream of morning sun.
To anyone watching it might have appeared that she
was thinking. Töl, however, who happened to pass,
suspected otherwise.

Töl simply passed. Inquiring would do no good.
Anyway, she already knew. Perhaps from her book,
perhaps from the view, Unn had been reminded of
something.

“Now what was that I wonder.” But when she
thought about it, the image would fail.

And when she’d try to retrieve it, having
subsequently grasped its meaning, both the image
and the meaning would fail.

Unn had explained all this to Töl far too many
times.

*On a table by the window stands a tiny vase of flowers.
The woman smells them once then carries them to the
garbage.*

*Pink spots on her scalp turn reddish and splotchy in the
late afternoon sun.*

*An old blouse flops loosely. A few fat flies crawl around
her apron.*

*The mind of the woman is warm, her sweaters and
chickens and all the places on the boat . . .*

“Hello,” Unn offers.

“What?” shouts the woman.

Unn had been reading. Light from the dawning sky fell upon her book. “The days are such that I hardly need a lamp,” she was thinking when she heard a click. “That would be Töl.”

Unn returned to her book and to the deep silence of the day.

“*Was* that Töl?” Aware suddenly of how quiet the house seemed, she paused. “Was that today? Maybe it was yesterday.”

Unn tried to remember precisely when she’d heard the lock on the door click, but she couldn’t be sure.

She closed her eyes. Recently she’d read—the article was in the *New York Times*—a war victim who’d been tortured was being treated for post traumatic stress. Though he’d suffered physical pain, his main symptom—what was intolerable to him and wouldn’t leave him—was the loss of a sense of time. He simply had no idea of where he was in space, of how much time had passed or how long any activity would take. When the therapist slowly said, “Take your time, Sergio, we have plenty of time,” it was as if his sobbing would never stop.

Unn had her alarm set for four except for once a week when she set it for five. Sometimes she changed it from five to four thirty.

In summer and in winter it was the same.

As soon as the alarm rang she got out of bed. In both summer and winter it was dark. But in summer, when the light was close and the birds were close, getting up was easier.

Every morning was the same. Except for on Sunday when it still was the same only one hour later. Inside, however, it felt the same.

She wondered if she used this “same” as a substitute for her husband.

THE RAINS OF JUNE the newspaper had said, referring in part to the husky sky and strong, wind-driven bowing of the trees.

A branch broken off and blown across the hill was leaning against a shrub that itself leaned awkwardly.

“It looks exhausted,” Unn sighed, then puzzled over the word “exhausted,” whether it had an emotional meaning.

So June was here, and the rains. A single crow on a leafless branch stared out into it.

Though its feathers were ruffled Unn could see the clear strong line of its throat and breast.

The breast puffed out.

The bill was strong. Its eyes were strong and its mind had a strong quietness about it.

And dawn too rising behind the rain, despite the rain, had that same strong quietness. Traces of its purity remained on the bird’s skin.

The crow was simply staring. It stood on its branch even with her window for a very long time.

Staring forward into wetness it didn’t blink.

Her own blinking by comparison had radically speeded up.

It began again in the evening. She sat for awhile listening, then went to bed early.

Laying there simply allowing—the fullness, the monotonicity, the slowing and slurring of drops against her pane.

With time the pattering grew louder.

UNNN, he uttered, which is the same. His death is the same.

I am without rivers. I am without a sound that can be replicated.

What can't be understood can't die. It was a heaviness in the air like the beginnings of a storm though the air itself was tepid.

She cupped her hands behind her head, to support her head, till it spilled itself out.

When she awakened it was summer. The hill was rich with the fragrance of summer trees and the earth too, under a light sprinkle, oozed with the smell of green.

The humming of insects was loud. Loud, however, carried time, as if this loud were happening long ago.

Unn listened as the rain fell through the air slowly.

Two white butterflies zigzagged across the hill.

They're dancing! she thought, following them over the crest.

Their zips and loops—she felt quite mesmerized—and even after they'd disappeared, she stood as if expecting them back any minute.

A fat yellow cat, stealthily, very stealthily, was maneuvering through the brush. But then suddenly—nothing had happened—its whole body relaxed. It flipped and flopped and rolled around in the wetness.

“Did you see your brother?” Töl, Unn knew, had been planning to visit her brother.

“You asked me that the other day, Ma’am. It’s the weekend after next that I’m going.”

Unn flushed. It wasn’t so much that she’d repeated herself. It was more that she had no idea. It was part of a whole complex of things that she was finding increasingly disturbing.

Unn woke with a start. “She couldn’t have said Saturday. She said Sunday. *Saturday* is the day she is planning to visit her brother.”

Töl had called saying that she thought the time was 1:00, Sunday at 1:00, but she wanted to make sure.

It happened when she had looked that although Töl was down for Saturday, since Sunday was free—“I’m just going to change it.” Unn called back and left a message to that effect so Töl would understand.

Unn had found the interchange quite pleasant. She was glad that she could make things easier for her maid.

Later—it must have been in her sleep—Unn remembered about Töl’s brother. Whereas normally she came in on Saturday, this week she’d asked to switch her day and they had agreed on 1:00 as being appropriate. And here she had gone and said what she had said. Unn cringed with embarrassment.

The room was dark. “I should check all of Töl’s times,” she muttered vaguely.

It was because of her age that she had developed this way of saying aloud what came into her mind.

“Let me see. How had he put it? *It’s just an old woman talking to herself.*” She had read the line recently.

Shingo’s wife from the other room had been remarking on her day while running water from a tap. Since he couldn’t hear her very well, his daughter-in-law, Kikuko, was passing on to him what she was saying.

“Probably because it was his wife, he wasn’t interested.”

Unn had thought that, because what she was saying—that the bush clover was blooming and that the pampas grass was beginning to send out new shoots—ordinarily would have interested him very much.

As it was he answered “Oh?”

“What?” “I said, ‘Oh,’ and that’s all I have to say.”

While not as aesthetically subtle, Yasuko had her own intuitive sensibilities. She often saw into things in ways that would never have occurred to her husband. Nevertheless he dismissed her. Undoubtedly it was her age and lack of physical beauty.

Though he was alert to the slightest intimation of feeling on the part of young Kikuko—way more than his son now her husband of several years—toward his own wife he seemed numb. In her mind Unn had said *dumb* but then had thought better of it.

This conversation had come back to her gratuitously.

Unn knew that she too had a version of Shingo's disdain.

She also knew that dismissive as he was, Shingo had married Yasuko and provided for her for thirty years after rescuing her from futile, familial humiliation and servitude.

Actually he had been in love with her beautiful older sister.

He had carried the memory of her young beautiful sister—indeed the memory of this dead sister was more alive to him than the presence in marriage of his wife.

Yasuko herself carried the same memory.

Since neither ever spoke of it, their marriage was like a blank. Two floating inner worlds connected by a thread. It was this blank that had so affected Unn. She couldn't get it out of her mind.

“Why aren't I more compassionate?” She had put no thought into the words. Had she paused, she might rather have strengthened her righteous judgments against the man.

With the remark, however, she felt all the immediacy of what must be Shingo's pain.

“Wasted. Wasted was the word.” It wasn't lost on him that his kindness to Kikuko was a fruitless effort to fill an inner void.

Well, not entirely fruitless. Kikuko definitely benefited. She too was in a helpless and lonely position. In that sense their bond was strong. His wife however acted as if she were aware of neither.

The comparison had suddenly occurred to Unn

Ever since her husband's death things like this would occur to her.

Rain fell during the night, one of those long, slow, protracted storms that comes before rain is due.

“It’s a nice spring rain,” Unn mused, forgetting that summer was rife.

As she lay in the dark listening to the blop blop blop, a flash of a dream . . .

Yet nothing remained.

She pulled her comforter up to her shoulders leaving her ears free.

Behind that dream lay another dream in which the phrase *waste of effort* kept reoccurring.

A riveting call echoing through the hills had resembled her own voice.

The call had a haunting quality. It traveled up her spine, landed at her skull and seemed to stop, going no further.

Probably it was the pressure that had awakened her.

“**A**LILY!” THE FIRST THIS YEAR.

Indeed lilies were everywhere. The abandon with which they played all waving together in a tangle.

One bud on an especially long stem seemed pale and tense like a very young girl.

Somehow in her mind white had become its color, as if within its color the essence was white.

“There’s that girl.” Unn couldn’t help herself. Something round and clean within the slenderness of her body touched her like a bell.

It was in the girl herself, as if a hard pure line of pulchritude had rushed to meet her in her body.

Unn thought of a stone that burned clean having been washed by sea. The cleanness was in the stone. It had grown solid there if one could see.

After the time of seeing has passed the inability to see will cause beauty to grow flabby.

She’d been thinking about this earlier. Somehow the girl seemed as yet unaffected.

Unn felt the depth of the line in her hair and, as it fell to her neck, in the joint that was exposed by the young cut of her dress.

Something about the fabric—at the shoulder it stood apart—“It’s shy,” Unn thought. “It hasn’t entirely settled onto her body.”

The flesh too seemed shy as if experimenting with such exposure.

One thick braid flopped across her back.

It lay in the hollow of her breasts, which were small though full. Emptiness carried the cleanness.

She must have sensed Unn looking. She'd
stopped as if confused.

Unn had not stopped looking.

The previous night Unn had read that for a certain character in her book, it would be no exaggeration to say that his first real problem—“That beauty should already have come into this world unknown to me” —was how he had put it.

It changed nothing whatsoever. Therefore he had great respect.

Having created beauty, this person’s ugliness . . . the beauty he had made had simply passed through his body leaving no mark.

Could this be true? Unn took a deep breath.

If the mind, beauty’s mind, permeated her mind, not only would she be changed but the whole course of her evolution would be altered.

All the while she’d been thinking she also had been walking.

Her eye fell on a tree. A white bird’s nest and its crest of pink-tipped twigs pierced through the impending darkness.

And now in the dark, the blackness of its flowers and the blackness of its leaves trembled quietly.

“A mind, using beauty for itself, gypping beauty, will not fulfill itself.”

“So it will hoard. Like selfish energy sticks and eventually destroys itself.”

Someone had given her a lily. Even in its wrappings it retained a drop of dew. Of all the lilies that Unn had ever seen, for its superb whiteness and beauty, perhaps this was the most astonishing.

Though she'd carefully changed its water, Unn felt that her actions, or even thoughts, had nothing to do with the lily's thriving.

Eventually it died. She'd held the stem in her hands, rolling it, massaging it, experiencing the wilted leaves rub against her as the petals revolved.

A ray of afternoon sun beat upon her back as she stooped to retrieve the scattered ones.

That was a Flycatcher

THE SUMMER SUN WAS FADING and the evening air was calm. Full and calm with no breeze.

“Windlessness so loud. It’s almost foreboding.” Yet all she could touch was a sense of disparity, a failure of nerves, as if the weather had nerves.

A jay had landed rather boisterously on her porch and its caw rattled on getting more and more irritating.

The bird was big, its vivid blue, jet-black bars and patches of white smudged. And its feather were torn, as if it had just been in a fight.

Even its wings seemed to make noise like the after-talk of an argument.

Caw caw caw though quieter now and Unn could see that its mind had slightly shifted.

The jay had flown away. The faint sound of a flute filtered through the dimness but the sound made no music.

Instead the sound made shadows.

The shadows had something sad and something tender and at the same time something unformed, even intoxicating about them.

Later on a rock two seagulls pecking at each other’s beaks made the same intoxicating shadows.

Unn liked to eat dinner around five.

It wasn't so much that she liked to eat at five. She actually preferred eight or even nine which felt more relaxed.

Not that she was more relaxed, but the idea seemed to fit more loosely around her body.

In truth, when she thought about it in that way, even ten wouldn't be too late.

Unn tried not to think about it in that way.

Instead she worked backwards. If she wanted to get up at four and also have plenty of sleep . . .

No doubt the edge came from resistance to admitting that she'd come to this.

Perhaps to a stranger it would not have appeared that this "this" was in any way remarkable. It might rather have seemed that Unn was intent.

Her housekeeper, Töl, gave it little thought. Indeed, more was apparent to her than the simple fact that Unn was eating early. She knew that Unn was preserving her writing mind.

Still for Töl it was awkward. About four-thirty Unn would get fidgety. It was a signal for Töl to leave.

“Töl dear. I’m glad you’re still here . . .”

It happened so frequently, Töl could hardly elect not to be available.

“Would you do me?” Unn had asked with her eyes and with an exaggerated disgruntled expression.

It seemed the maid was leaving.

Töl knew that Unn knew because of the bundles she was carrying and also because of the coat that she was still in the process of buttoning.

Töl also knew that Unn preferred that she simply leave.

Unn’s arms were raised and her head thrust forward as she fiddled with the thing.

“Just as I think I’ve got it . . .” she pleaded. Töl was already putting down her packages.

The maid patted her shoulder to indicate that she had finished.

After she left, Unn just sat staring at herself.

Viewing her life as a whole, Unn thought she could detect something moving like a cipher.

Indeed she felt stalked. Stalked by her own life. Even in her dreams the same encrypted situation . . .

Over time came the conjecture that these little bits and pieces of what had previously been her were lying there crafting her into a future her.

She could actually tell when it was happening.

As Unn got up—“That was a flycatcher,” she thought, seeing a small bird with a dark red breast hopping about a tree. With a piercing cry it flew off.

She was aware she had a headache. In her dream she'd also had a headache.

“Is something the matter?” Unn, chest to knee, was examining her toe. Not wishing to intrude Töl inquired from the hallway.

“My big toe hurts. I think it’s cold. It’s been cold all morning even in my slippers.” Unn was shocked at how fast the words spilled out.

Later she lay awake listening to the sound of a train.

“It’s going through a tunnel. As soon as it gets out I’ll be able to fall asleep.”

The rushing of the train was beginning to resemble a roar.

Or was it wind? The roar issued directly from the darkness.

When she woke the train had stopped. Several passengers at the front of her car were leaning out the window.

It was in a field. Low mid-morning sun spread softly over her body.

Across the aisle a woman was knitting. The colorful yarn had little bumps that once worked up resembled butterflies.

“Is something wrong, Ma’am?” It was the second time that Töl, passing Unn’s room, had seen her staring at her leg.

Unn didn’t answer. From the doorway all Töl could tell was that Unn, having positioned herself near a window, was examining something.

Töl walked over to Unn’s side.

“Ridiculous!” Unn said. “Utterly ridiculous. Yesterday there was not a hair to be seen and today, look at this!” She was standing with her foot propped on a chair, leaning over her shin.

Töl couldn’t see anything but her leg.

“It’s happened before. One day nothing. The next, each hair is like an inch. They’re always in a clump. A little group near the bone.”

Töl was at a loss. She was beginning to see what her employer was talking about, however.

“Is the other leg the same?” She asked this mainly so that Unn would feel less alone.

Unn didn’t immediately reply. “It’s not like this leg,” she finally offered, as if just noticing the question.

That had happened in the morning. Unn’s room

got morning light. She had probably waited for the sun to hit a spot where she could see her leg clearly.

Unn was on a train. Brilliant light was streaming through her window. Beyond the boiling, diaphanous light, lay miles and miles of wheat fields.

The car's one other passenger had long ago gotten off.

At first she'd closed her eyes. She wanted to feel the heat pressing against her eyelids.

But then, relishing her aloneness, she'd opened them.

Was it the light, the privacy or the wheat fields? Her head was filled with soft undulations of overlapping shafts of gold.

Slouched in her chair she watched the ever-waving grasses. Sometimes they waved one way, sometimes another. Sometimes the wave made an angle to the sun and a shadow would break out making a sort of ridge. The ridges might be small with deeply shaded inclines. Or, perhaps in relation to the sun, the rounded rows of wheat would be the bended backs of laborers whose life and the wheat were the same.

Seeing the wheat usually made her feel lonely. Today, however, she did not feel lonely.

In the Loud Chirping of the Grass

SUMMER RAIN. The evening air was soft as Unn sat listening to its patter.

The heat too was soft. By night hardly a breath of air touched the flowers.

Instead she heard the dark, almost as a voice, inside the grass, in the loud chirping of the grass.

The dark was infused with wanting, as if she were the grass or a cricket with its ears. The song and the wanting on the knees of its front legs would be laughing loudly.

“What are you laughing at?” He was lying at her side on a little bed.

Cool air from the window spread the flavor of his voice around her back and thighs like a cocoon.

“Am I laughing?” The laughing was like letters. His words garnered the flow of him into her.

And the scent of jasmine climbing up the bricks trailing little salver-shaped flowers.

The knowing of him was of always. The miracle of arriving in the laughing jasmine night. But she was asleep. They were in a car. He put his hand on her knee—“is it alright if I touch you?”

In the morning as she wrote light came flooding over her body.

Five bright heads. The sunflowers had reached their prime.

“A strong flower,” she mused. It used to be that she hadn’t liked them. They’d seemed leggy and always a little disheveled.

Actually they were much like male persons.

“Probably they’re Virgos.” The precision of their seeds all in a row suggested the systematic strength characteristic of male Virgos.

She didn’t exactly know. “Do people give their flowers astrological readings?”

Several days passed. It was late on a hot afternoon and Unn was watching clouds forming and dissolving. Like her life, she was thinking.

Flowers on the ground scattered in a shallow breeze.

The garden was in shade. A huge crow perched on a magnolia.

“Elegant but not winsome,” Unn thought, captured by the bird’s stare. Though it looked directly at her, it also somehow excluded her. She could feel its mind both taking her in and, slowly turning its head, marginalizing her. Its eyes were like glass designed to be impenetrable.

Perhaps in her feelings there was a touch of sadness.

Lately her awareness, heightened to the extreme, seemed to latch onto a feeling and, even when she didn’t feel it, it would be there.

As if her life were a dream and everything in it bathed in a transparent blur.

What must it be for her to feel marginalized by a bird? The scent of loss and want of deference filled her nostrils.

Standing in the dusk, fixated on the crow's
overwhelming size and blackness, it seemed its world,
large and dark, was all that was left.

It had rained all through June and on into July.

Even now—August was usually dry—from the fourth to the fifth it rained, and on the morning of the sixth the shallow rain had shifted to a downpour.

Not only had it rained longer, it seemed to Unn that it also had rained harder.

What's more, though the air was still, the sky was heavy. If she hadn't known better, she might have expected snow.

“It’s Saturday.” Unn, washing her face and studying the sky, forgot that she was washing her face.

Clouds floated toward her. Through an open window a bee.

“I’m going to wash my hair also,” she was thinking.

Afterwards she left carrying two woven shopping bags.

“Did you find everything you need?” The check-out boy was quick. He had most of her items scanned and ready to bag before she had time to fish out her wallet.

“I’m sorry. It’s in here somewhere.”

“So how has the day been treating you so far?”

In addition to her groceries she had a selection of summer chrysanthemums.

“Yeh,” he said. “Usually we don’t get them till November at the earliest.”

It was high noon. A rainbow had emerged as Unn lugged her packages home.

The rainbow was behind her.

How had she known to turn around?

The rainbow sat low, about the height of a person's shoulder or a little higher.

It made a clear arc of colors in typical rainbow order, but the portion to the right seemed to drop off midway down. When Unn stopped to look, the bottom of its arm would vanish.

And as she thought this she began to see a second, fainter rainbow forming inside the first one, its colors arranged oppositely.

The second rainbow was also missing the lower part of its arm.

She remembered earlier seeing two other rainbows but she couldn't recall if they had the same missing arm. "Neither were double rainbows, however."

Looking south where the view was hidden among some clouds, she could not tell if yet another fainter rainbow was about to appear from behind the clouds' face.

Just as a rainbow can only appear within space and not anywhere else, so someone lies between night and night, the bedding of the color black or as if he came out of a screw.

As if a mountain stops sending color down its edges, like when he becomes a rainbow after dying like that.

The bedroom begins again. It will never leave because he died.

And now the sun is alone.

Alone is a color in her heart.

“I’m going to visit the bell.” She knew it was a whim. The bell had been blessed, suspended in a tree and all its sounds dedicated.

But she missed the tree which had its own internal sound.

And around the tree—between the tree and a little wall that had been raised—some sort of giggling white flower.

The youngness of the white against the oldness of the tree—still, some of the monks—“The tree looks tired,” they complained.

Indeed when one looked carefully, its weariness seemed undeniable.

Though many years had passed since Unn had seen the tree, its tiredness could be heard not only in the bell’s sound, but, she felt, even the deep fragrances of the land had been affected.

Shafts of sun streamed through its branches scattering gray shadows.

Later she had a dream. The temple grounds were dark. Rain, falling in great drops, began to collect on the tree’s ripened limbs. At each lightning flash there was the scent of earth. And the raindrops burned “as

if they were on fire!"

That was the dream. When Unn had tentatively touched the end of a charred branch, it immediately shriviled.

She was aware of a vague, incoherent quality, unnamable though familiar.

*Certainly he is dying. But he says, No! I feel the press
of something in my body.*

*But days and then the light appears and even the bed
where there is nothing but the pleasure in the dying.*

*Whereby in the depths of himself, in the entrails of the
image in the bottom of himself . . .*

*Will he die? She involuntarily thought with him about
what was not being accomplished in him, inimical in him
though it appeared.*

*He has begun plucking at himself someone says in
reference to death, as if this is the beginning. This is how it
starts.*

*The wily expression of death slinks into inwardness,
which takes time, like the sand moving, even the coarse
sand here.*

That night she couldn't sleep. Her body felt hot. Yet she could see from her curtain that there was a breeze.

And a vast depth to the moonlit sky. She got up and looked out.

Crickets. Their sound was cool, unhampered by the sky.

A cricket shrills but it is night rubbed with night, the feeling of death happening.

When a cricket shrills at the foundation stones of a temple, I am already dead.

The Honk of a Goose

OCTOBER HAD BEGUN. Unn was in the garden. One flower, she noticed, was drooping in the shadows.

“It’s a rose. Or the mummy of a rose. A too-intent gaze might cause its petals to fall.”

Saturated once by the rays of summer light, it still, she felt, conveyed some warmth.

Drawn by a sound Unn looked up. A huge cluster of red dragonflies was swirling above and in front of her.

So autumn was here. The dragonflies had brought it. “Are dragonflies really red?” Probably it was just the season they were carrying.

Or the fatigue of summer. A wave of its weight suddenly passed through her body.

“Look, it’s going to rain,” he’d said, pointing with his umbrella at some ominous clouds to the west.

Storm clouds, now here, now there, passed thundering and black across the sky. The center of one had decidedly darkened.

It seemed a white curtain of rain having invaded the distant forest was moving quickly toward them, its wetness breaking into thin fine drops.

The drops were intense and left gullies in the ground.

What had been rain when she woke up by dawn had become a storm.

Already in her bathrobe Unn stood looking at the sky.

Each branch had its own sky.

And the sound of the mountain had the clarity of death.

It was not *her* death. It was just death. That she then saw in a face.

The surface of the face with which it had been alive had sunk so low as if the heart of low had suddenly been torn out.

The dead bird's face, thus removed from its physical existence, seemed likewise removed from its true existence as a bird, though she could not say for certain how this true existence manifested.

Since it'd seemed contained in the bird, she would equate the bird, and especially its face, with its true existence.

But was it simply true existence, which she now realized has no precise stake in itself?

Unn remained looking at the face. It was lying on its side with its big eye turned back into its head.

And the mountain ahead of her, it was as if it were being seen without any prior meaning.

Indeed it reappeared, renewing its own meaning, after having slept, awakening to its meaning.

Beyond the surf and the thick grind of moving water, only the folds in its sides stood out clearly.

As far the rest, everything seemed collapsed.

Unn had left the bird on the rock but she could not leave it. She'd found herself continuing to look though she'd roamed quite a distance from the body.

"It's going to be hot," she said, aware through the clouds of a strong white glare.

Another kind of light had also broken out, not a glare, though it was hard to define.

The day was loud with jays. Though none could be seen, the whole vicinity, what with their ruckus, was filled with disturbance.

Unn stopped. On an impulse she said a prayer. In the middle of the prayer her eye glazed her fingers which were blue like a ghost, despite the heat, despite the glare.

It was just a face and in its immaculate skin Unn saw the motion of age—it almost seemed that it was happening in her eyes—the disposition of the skin, more defined, more set, as if the skin itself had always known where it was going.

Is he hurrying? The air against the face is white like his face which is pensive and turned downward.

The lines are deep.

Still this face, fresher and younger, the boy of the face floating free of his body, his face, a clean, surreal white, glowed with no shadow.

Sadness, but somehow not her sadness, the sadness spoke of mourning with a high musical beauty.

In her heart there surged a supreme happiness that she was unable to explain just from the face.

In fact the high resonance of the face on its own volition seemed to come echoing back across the sky and through the rain-drenched light. Even now the cheeks and eyes, the contour of the chin, were filled with his perfume.

The person's form floating up, strength gathering in his neck, was making a cameo of his body carved in relief of the rain's dull thud.

For Unn, the face and the rain were like two seas of transparent emotion.

“IT’S LUCIANO,” Töl announced. He was holding a bunch of cornflowers.

Their blue was soft like the sky.

Some of the petals facing away, accentuated perhaps by their drab green stems, bore an ineluctable sense of oldness.

When he’d entered the room he had been carrying the flowers, but as if his purpose had left his mind, he just continued to hold them.

What do you suppose the word “sparkling” means in the last line?” Luciano finally grumbled.

Unn knew what he meant. When he eventually glanced over she was staring out the window.

“I’ve thought a lot about it. Since he left it open...” Her word “open” trailed off.

Luciano said nothing.

“My deepest sense . . . my deepest sense is that she *had* killed him and that she was pregnant with his baby. ‘Sparkling’ means that her revenge was a success.”

“But *that’s* what I keep wondering . . .” Then he’d paused.

“If Keiko has Taichiro’s baby, it would be Oki and Fumiko’s grandchild!” It was said in a hush, as if the

reality had just dawned on him.

Unn's thoughts had wandered to a painting. A man and a woman with almost identical faces, long and prim with tight mute lips, stood side by side with their baby son in the middle. All three wore black with a priestlike collar. While the parents' skin looked ashen, the child's burned in gold. A soft fleshy gold. Its head was bald except for a tiny black topknot and its baby penis was gold. Its innocent-but-stern expression plus its young vibrant organ were the composition's subject. Crossing all three was a thin angular red line.

“They wouldn’t have to know! There would be no reason for them to know.”

After her student left Unn continued thinking. “Keiko and Otoko could raise the child with neither Oki nor his wife knowing anything about it.”

Unn was picturing Oki as he had been after Taichiro’s drowning, putting his arm around Fumiko’s shoulder and leading her away. It was symbolic of Keiko’s triumph.

It wasn’t a choice. Oki now, bound by his circumstances, was simply an old man.

Unn tried to picture how the relationships might play out.

Had the fetus followed murder? Keiko would prevaricate. But would Otoko abandon Oki’s ersatz child after hers had been so brutally taken away?

Kawabata had made it clear that if Keiko were pregnant the child would not be Oki’s, but Taichiro’s, Oki’s son.

Unn had the fleeting image of a very old Oki suddenly smitten by a girl whose beauty—she’d be fifteen, of course . . .

Unn’s body stopped.

Later she remembered a dream. In low dunes by a shallow tide two butterflies were frolicking. They darted out almost to disappear, then darted back, a deep blue against the sky. More arrived and the space became a ring, a swarm of wings washing over the sun. “This light is pure blue,” she said. The center of the flame was foaming. Yet the wings looked frozen. The swarm had spread so as to be like a glacier.

AND NOW IT WAS FALL.

An old Monterey Pine, its lower branches spread out wide and very near the ground, stood such that in the late-afternoon light it appeared to Unn almost dreamlike.

And there was, she felt, an even older quiet in the exquisite subtlety of each of its leaf's dulling shades.

Her eyes were down. Trailing shadows played over her cheeks and arms as she ambled along slowly.

Here and there delicate white flowers thread their way back into the woods.

While Unn along with everyone had felt the time change come unusually early this year, having seen the light glancing off the leaves, instead of, what had become so prevalent, a kind of dreary lowering of day into coldness.

Layer upon layer of their broad-fingered shadows fell upon the walkway.

Unn didn't move. It was after 4:00, the sun about to set.

Seething with life in numbing air the earth had quieted itself to a certain restrained low.

The honk of a goose roused her.

An old transparent emptiness opened—she felt it in her heart—and into the emptiness sank the honk of the goose.

It occurred to her that geese—“but what am I thinking? It's more a question of wanting to hear the honk again!”

“Please bring it back. Pleeeeee . . .” she pleaded. The bird had flown out while she’d been feeding it.

She thought she saw it land in a tree across the street. Since the tree was what the parakeet would see—its cage was by the window—she stood, also by the window, staring out unable to think of anything.

“Tweeetie! Tweeetie!” It usually would respond by hopping over and pecking at her finger.

Though her calling over time conveyed increased desperation, its cage, now empty of the bird, all she could do was continue calling.

One day the sun had come out to the clear song
of a lark.

“Did you hear the lark?” It was Töl. Her words
felt sharp against the wet late-afternoon sky.

The pines aglow with flares gave off an
astonishing assortment of colors.

Subsequently, from the seat of a child’s swing,
Unn gathered some scattered petals.

The place was empty but the swing kept swinging
quietly back and forth.

Nothing else in the park moved.

“I know but I was just saying . . .” They’d been walking toward the bay. As soon as the rain had stopped, a gay, silver light appeared between some cloud-rifts.

Then a thick-throated chug, apparently from a ship.

“That was a kingfisher. Did you see that low-flying bird back there?”

He had been facing the same direction staring at a long plume of smoke through the dusk.

It had been then that she’d leaned lightly against his arm. She remembered her surprise at the warm solidity of his body.

“We picked a good hour, didn’t we?” he offered casually.

But she’d sensed that he was confused. Had she instinctively drawn toward him because she’d felt a kind of absence in him or because of some inner coming-to-terms with what might have been difficult, living together as they had, under the circumstances that they had.

The depth of their connection and her deep knowing of him made such thoughts seem entirely natural.

She’d been unable to respond. Her body, however, had suddenly perked up and her pace and gaze were alert.

In this way autumn had neared its end. It was still too early for the full flowering of her favorite white chrysanthemums, but the colors of the leaves made her listen, not just to the leaves, but to the birds and the amazing sunsets.

The streets were hushed, yet the hush had an expectancy. Teeny flowers of bright, strong blue appeared among weeds shrouded in mist.

Earlier there were birds. One or two with the same few notes.

A very thin bird hobbled across the road. “It’s limping,” she whispered.

A Single Star

FOR NOVEMBER THE WEATHER WAS BALMY.

Bulbous leaves were flip-flopping about. But the air was dry. And windy. “Fire weather,” people were saying.

Day after day brownish clouds trapped the sun’s potential light, but then it cleared. Without rain.

And the dawns too, their blood-red glow—but with no drops, their burgeoning stance seemed menacing.

Finally, in a baleful dusk, a small rumble of thunder.

“Isn’t that rain?” Her body all but leaning against the glass had been facing slightly away from him.

He turned to look in the direction she was pointing.

“Could be. Is it supposed to rain?”

“No, I mean really. It’s not just mist hovering over the pines, is it?”

The moisture was wrapped in clouds. A low-rolling clump lumbering above the bay and the overcast sky were nearly the same color.

The rain itself had stopped leaving the air sweet
Exiting a cab Unn watched a leaf, first tumble
laterally then land in a recession at the roadside.

“It’s resting in air, *holding on to air!*” It alighted on
a dead body.

Motionless, on its back, the animal also seemed to
be resting.

Though its fur was black and shiny, its belly was
white. Mud had worked into its paws. Inside its
beaklike mouth lay a soft, fleshy pink.

“It’s a mole,” Unn intuited, though she had no
idea what a mole looked like. It was exceedingly
small and its eyes especially seemed very small.

She stared for a long time at its crumpled skin
and hairless tail.

Departing the museum Unn felt bereft. She'd spent the whole time on a single portrait.

To Marry a Mule. That was the caption beneath a photograph of a young Chinese man in black tuxedo and white ruffled shirt next to a small white mule, rouged and behatted and decked out with flowers.

The man too held a bouquet.

From out the folds of flimsy pink fabric trailing off the mule, one bestockinged leg—mesh ran half way up its thigh—stood demure, almost prim, conveying a definite sense of devoted submission.

The floor was covered in shiny pink something and a red and pink curtain had been improvised as a backdrop. The curtain showed one white star.

The effect was quiet and full of restrained passion.

It was not at all foolish. Indeed, what was disturbing, was the intensity and seriousness of both the man and the mule's facial expressions.

One *felt* their pact. The perfect purity of their commitment.

The artist's name was Wang Jin. "Performance in Laiguanying village, Beijing, July 28, 1995" was all the placard said.

Unn was reminded of a book of peasant altars—the little nothing devotional objects that had moved her so profoundly.

And here again, in this seemingly ridiculous photograph. But there was nothing ridiculous about the man. In fact she'd never seen a jaw that said "I know precisely what I'm doing" with such certainty. And integrity.

No doubt it was symbolic. The man was marrying his own stubbornness. His bride was a political belief.

Unn felt her heart jump.

Rain had come down in torrents during the night and now, back in her room after washing her face and brushing her teeth, Unn felt the residual weariness.

Very fat, very slow—one drop at a time seemed to land on her porch with a crash.

Plop, plop, plop. The sound would weigh like death would weigh.

Her eye fell on a flower.

Though it was just a morning glory, probably wild, the ordinary indigo of an ordinary morning glory, its green and the intense purity of its blue seemed so innocent against the fence, clinging and at the same time arching back in the sopping air.

The air was its support. For its brief span of life

Something whimsical about the flower, both young and about to die. It came like a sound. As though she could hear the rest of her life.

FINALLY THE LONG SPELL OF TYPICAL LATE-
AUTUMN RAINS, SOGGY AND COLD, SETTLED IN.

In the morning on her walk, there was nothing but the muddy sea glimpsed through some beaten palms at the water's edge.

Around 4:00 it started again. "A peregrine's for luck," she thought, as the shadow of a wing swept overhead.

First one wing then the other dipped as if it were trying to find its stride, and then, just when it seemed about to drop, instead of downwards it glided backwards and upwards.

Though the incoming tide was roaring and the sea quite black, in her mind it was sable and carried the coldness of the color of mourning.

Sables are not solely for the dead, however.

Dank cloudy days succeeded one another as the leaves fell and the wind grew dark.

“Whatever is happening seems to be happening everywhere,” Unn mused, taking a seat near the clinic’s bayview window.

A receptionist at her computer was chewing gum.

“What kind of flowers are those,” Unn asked, pointing to an arrangement of fake bluish blossoms dangling over the filing cabinet.

“Maybe there’s a tag.” The woman got up to look. Returning to her desk she’d just shrugged her shoulders.

“Be careful. The ground is still wet here.” The speaker, speaking loud, was holding a person’s elbow.

Huge sporadic drops had begun to spatter against the glass, so sporadic in fact that between drops she’d forget.

Instead, the memory of a man in strong daylight in some sort of large room popped up.

It was the image of his hands whose left pinky finger wore a long, carefully polished nail.

The tip was pointy and extended well beyond the flesh, which was olive-colored and luxuriantly smooth like a woman’s.

The hand took hers gently but the nail was held apart. She remembered something young, even impetuous, about its color.

And the breath of sadness that it carried. How many hours had he poured into tending it, every day, clipping, filing, buffing.

As if the showiness of the nail pertained rather to what was sheltered by the nail.

Her gaze dropped to his toes. A few were painted orange.

“Skin beneath the nail’s tip feels to the person

like a newborn's," she recalled.

Just then one of the toes had wiggled. Unn quickly withdrew her eyes.

She apologized to the toes. Later she apologized to the fingernail also.

Unpleasantly wet days went on. Feeling quite drained of energy, Unn stayed in bed till 10:00.

Shapes above the sill took sharp forms in the lingering rainwater.

And then she heard the crows, their discordant shrieks and the beating of their wings as they took off.

First fully, then less and less fully, she was conscious of a certain foreboding.

It seemed to her now, as she readied to get up, that that experience hadn't happened.

A chilly wind had broken by the time she'd bathed. Sitting with her tea, the lines of rain, bent in eerie light, cast—"shrill" was the word that came to mind—shadows.

"Shrill" was in my dream." Something . . . because she could barely do it with her body . . . someone had awarded her a body that she thought she could use, but she woke up. The borrowed sense of strength had stayed with her however.

The words of a war song, though in a different language, arose but fell away as the dream fell away.

They were just stray words. Yet they repeated themselves and repeated themselves.

The night said rain and as Unn progressed briskly through the streets, she could feel the rain cloistered in the fog, not yet released by the fog.

The air lost space even while Unn sensed limitless space.

There was no sky, just protuberant air refusing to slacken its tightness.

A sound, from the inside of her ears, also felt tight.

“I’ll close the window,” Töl said, as soon as she walked in. Unn’s face had relaxed but her jaw, almost jowl-like, staunchly protruded like a man’s.

She’d glimpsed, she felt, something comparable in herself to the spaces of the night, one limited, one limitless.

As Töl drew the blinds the impression disappeared.

Then instantly another the shape of a black tulip. The solidity with which it stood sank into a quiet that seemed only to involve itself.

“It’s beautiful, don’t you think,” said Töl, placing an arrangement of gourds on the table near where Unn was seated. Luciano had dropped by. He’d been struck with their seasonal color.

His casually elegant arm offering them to Töl woke brightly in Unn's mind.

Several stalks and numerous fleshy fruits rolled about a tall, thin vase.

"They're round," Unn said. "Usually gourds are asymmetrical." For a long time she sat quite stuck upon the point.

That had been several days ago. The experience came back as she passed a still-unfixed path lamp.

“Should I say something?” A deep reluctance welled up.

Then the memory of her husband who had a habit of leaving on lights.

“Should I say something?” When he died of course, the habit had also died.

Unn was thinking that except for her husband, she didn’t know anyone who had died. That is anyone close to her.

But then she remembered that her parents had died. First her father. She couldn’t remember how many years later her mother had followed.

They’d long been divorced. Neither of their deaths affected the other in the slightest.

Unn was appalled that she could forget.

Walking by the sea she felt mesmerized by a sound, as if of rain but it was soft, like an essence, as though the fog had turned, not to rain, but to dense vaporous bits of its own flesh.

As though the fog had died leaving a remainder, like the sensation around her nose after she removed her glasses.

Her glasses, Unn felt, had a ghost.

She'd go to take them off, yet the sense of their being on, the *memory* of her glasses was alive in her skin apart from the object and more palpable than the object.

And tonight's fog. Even while it was there, its memory was even more there.

"Are you asleep?" Töl was about to leave.

"It's more a kind of slumber, a quiescence from the fog," Unn answered drowsily.

Töl paused.

It's the waiting of a fish on the inside of a word,
Unn blurted out. It came from another world.

"Well, I'll be leaving now." Töl had said it in a hush. It was clear that she was interrupting.

A SULTRY DAY. Not the weather but her state of mind. The day itself was nothing special.

Perhaps it seemed so because the day before—after weeks of fog, a ruddy glow from morning till late afternoon, had set the whole of a windswept landscape off in pure red light against an astonishing pale sky.

The earth lay red, with rocks like bones, trees like bones. The brightness of the bones seemed to be burning icily.

Hilly pines stood out darkly.

*He is red and his body a transparency of all that is held
in what we think of as a red color.*

*You feel that there is in him some necessary and very
important thing, also very red.*

*The brain of the color is motion, red without sky, so you
just see what is left. even if the sky moves.*

*A layer of cold mountain color cascading into pockets, a
few blazing peaks poked out against the darker ones.*

And now floating clear, now hidden by a cloud, a single star shone through the haze, though she could not tell where the star was.

The faint red of the star seemed to flow down the mountain's face.

And the moon too, a darkish red, was working its way down from the summits.

“It longs to escape the sea, to circumvent its pull as it falls with the night into blackness.”

She could smell the sea, the deep, swarthy water, its undulations, and even the moon's impenetrable color had condensed and filled her nostrils.

Black light. There was a drab poverty in the scene, yet under it she heard a massive, urgent poise.

The rain began slowly. It was soft, almost a spray. “Its wetness speaks of gentleness, the gentleness of benevolence,” Unn thought. Indeed it felt like a sign.

“Drizzle, after all, composed of the tenderest dew . . . it’s incompleteness itself, therefore, inadvertently, it will be a portent of incompleteness.”

Such anticipatory awareness had arisen only lately in her.

The recognition brought neither excitement nor curiosity. Instead Unn felt a wave of irrelevancy, a wooden sense of deadness that she couldn’t place.

“It’s ceaseless. Yes.” This was clear. Drizzling is always somewhere.

Because it is incomplete, because it will never stop. “But what if it did stop?”

Drizzly Day, New Year's

IT WAS STILL RAINING ON NEW YEAR'S EVE AND
NEW YEAR'S DAY WAS ALSO RAINY.

The sopping trees, the feeling of waiting palpable in their limbs, carried a kind of pressure.

Her ears felt tight. Her hair also felt tight. The receptivity of the trees—she would have thought it would be the opposite—created a kind of slouch, like the laxness that comes after so much waiting.

From her room, which looked directly west, Unn saw the dim brightness of a year-end day being sucked back into the earth.

The next day, Monday, Unn woke with a sense of dread.

A blustery wind had risen from the sea. You could hear it in the grass, and in the mountain beyond, a quiet, chilly glow that she recognized from old paintings of Christ.

As though the body itself were suffering, but the heart, the essence, was not suffering.

In one painting a soft, plump trail had sunk its way into a long, drawn-out sadness.

Even now, as the day slipped into dusk, it was the doleful aftermath of that sorrow that drained into Unn's increasingly cold body.

Her eyes were cold, which cold, meandering down her spine and settling in her feet, felt oddly final.

The image of Christ's feet—the painter had pegged them with one nail—would thicken, sharply, the sensation of numbness in her own feet.

She had seen the painting in her youth. Yet the effect had not been sad. The effect had been uplifting.

She had, she felt, heard Christ's blood flowing into her. Actually, she could still hear it.

The thump of rain splattered on her thoughts. Rain carried by wind—she experienced it in her chest—the rich moist smell, and then below that another stronger, fuller-bodied one.

And below that? An unpindownable perfume, faintly from far away.

As gentle steady drops continued to fall and continued to spread more thoroughly through her body, she suddenly saw her feet rising in air. Detached, unbounded. *Free toes.*

Suspended in air, which was mountain air, the feet seemed to inhale in full gulps.

Though they were only feet, she sensed the complete person to which the feet belonged.

Not an image but a sound drifted from the feet, a vague sound, like snow in the distance.

Before snow, snow is in the air.

Arriving at this air. The whole point of his life is arriving at this air. She could feel the sky making it.

The space of falling snow, long and late at night, reminded her of her husband's eyes.

He said it was his death. He knows, he said, because he'd said it in a dream.

It was already quite dark and in the south where he was looking there were no clouds.

The clouds stood to the north. From there lightning and a roll of distant thunder.

She too had felt the passing, but to her, in her dream, she thought she was remembering it wrong.

Finally the rain stopped. The trees were plump with dripping. It was hard to tell, if behind the drops a second rain weren't beginning.

The second rain would be skinnier, a thin veil over the first, increasingly recumbent one.

"It's the pity." She was still thinking about Christ, just now Christ's face, but when she looked, she saw her own sad face.

As if her light, opposed to its own radiance, was opaque.

In Christ she saw the face of the face, whereas in herself she simply saw the face.

She saw, she said, "a not-reflecting light," which was the tale of her eyes, but not the tale of her heart's eyes.

In her thought she felt her nullity before Him, He who was anterior to her mind.

And there, in the dead of night, the only sign of life on the deserted shore was a beached fishing boat. The shadow of its prow, long and black against the sand, made the hour, shivering in white almost rapturous.

Strange she felt so safe. Even the moon's rays detailing the boat, in the intermittent wind she felt its peace in the pit of her stomach.

The sea was dotted with eyes. The sky with stars

In fact Unn felt invincible. Somewhere inside she knew she was impervious. Her body was impervious and her mind, also, against the lurking dark forces.

Winter Flowers

AN EBULLIENT WINTER MORNING, clouds piled in the sky. Unn stood feeling the youngness of the sky as if she were five, clean and fresh of every possible movement.

As if her life, in terms of her body, hadn't yet happened, though there she was with her age.

Only day sounds could be heard.

A spritely bird, brown with a black and white head, swooped to a land in front of her. Its features were clean and its hop struck Unn as delightfully young and clean.

Having looked around, probably to feel a wind current, it flew off.

Then she felt it. Snow was falling on her lightly.

It fell on the road, on the withered leaves of oaks, on the dingy fences and disheveled, wasted patches of dead flowers. It continued to fall, noiselessly and bright, but not enough to cover the ground. Even the flakes that fell on her coat vanished leaving no sign.

It's surreal white like snow that is impossible, she thought. It didn't entirely make sense.

And as she stood, gradually becoming wet—"There's no sign of snow over there." It appeared to be falling only in this one spot.

Indeed the snow seemed petrified having lost its way in the approaching-night air.

The sea too seemed to be petrified.

She was conscious of its weight as of a presence around her shoulders.

Later it started again. Though not as mild as before.

“It’s just flurry. Maybe it will pass.”

No one was about. A biting wind cut into her eyes.

In the distance echoed the scraping sound of a trolley.

“Has it stopped?” She’d been listening, then losing her awareness of listening.

The wind had died.

Suddenly a hare shot out over the snowdrifts.

The skin of the snow is scratched, Unn thought, as if its hollowness had been pulled back into her, its oldness frozen into her.

To Unn’s old ears, the hollowness of the sound seemed similar to the surf. After breaking on the rocks. Receding from the rocks.

It was smooth to her mind, like seething or fizzing.

“**T**HANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR BRINGING ME. I REALLY HAD A NICE TIME. And I have a feeling I may get better now.” Unn read the line again.

The first time—“They’re like a little girl leaving a party.”

After seven or eight years of being inextricably parted, they’d practically collided, one getting on and the other off a train.

Re-reading the words forced Unn to name what must have been Utako’s constraint.

Jiro was now married. Therefore, his acknowledgement of something important still between them—“I hope we can take care of what’s important”—Utako couldn’t know how to receive such a gesture.

It was *because* she still loved him, and he her. After all, though it had been taken away, they had had a child together.

Utako had been amazed to learn of the great measures Jiro had employed, first to discover the child’s whereabouts and soon thereafter its death.

But she didn’t believe it. “Even if my father told you . . . being here with you like this, I feel sure that it can’t be true.”

Jiro recalled going to see Utako's father, getting the address of the family who had taken the child in and even going to their home to mourn, but he said nothing of all this to Utako.

Instead he'd said, "There's already snow on Mount Fuji" as their train swept by.

"You're right. The first snow." Utako had read an article about it that morning in the paper.

Seeing Jiro enlivened by the subject, she added, “The picture must have been taken yesterday.... It’s odd isn’t it—the clouds keep moving, but the arrangement stays the same.”

Unn also struggled with the word “odd.”

Jiro had doubted—having little reason to look closely, it was just a newspaper photograph of Fuji—that she’d looked carefully enough to judge about the clouds.

So that when passing it on their return—“There are no clouds at all today”—to Jiro’s retort, “Yeah, it’s not very interesting, is it” she’d said, “Oh, I don’t know. You don’t think it’s because we saw it yesterday? Even looking at Mount Fuji must get boring if you see it all the time.”

From that he’d concluded that she was ready to say good-bye.

It was then that she’d said what on first reading had to Unn’s ears sounded false.

They must have sounded false to Jiro also because his response was the same as to what she’d said about the clouds.

He just went on looking at the snow as if, if he looked hard enough, the snow itself would decide.

Unn was in her chair. She had closed the book and was staring out the window.

Frost lay thick across the ground, except for a few places where there was none at all.

“Utako wasn’t bored. She was spent as a woman. ‘Thank you very much. I had a very nice time’ would sanction Jiro’s life and certainly push him away. As her parents had before on learning of her pregnancy.”

“Over the years Jiro has gotten used to this from Utako.”

That night Unn reread the story. It was because of the last line. She felt haunted by the last line.

Jiro's going on looking at the meager snow after being with Utako like that.

From Jiro's point of view—taking the whole thing from his perspective, he had fallen in love and conceived a child only first to have his lover taken away, then the child given away, the child dying and his lover forced (it had to have been by fiat) into marriage with someone who'd abused her—how must it be for him to see the dregs of her after, bearing two more children, she'd finally escaped?

The war of course had complicated everything

The emptiness and disappointment of what had been so promising, like yesterday's first snow . . . “It's not really very interesting, is it.”

“Oh, I don't know . . .” Utako had countered, touching Jiro's hand. That was when she'd brought up the idea that it might be repetition that made it boring. Clearly she was afraid that she had used up her stay.

“But that's not at all how Jiro felt!”

Utako's need for care and comforting somehow

made it hard for her to see that Jiro too needed to recover.

Later Unn had a dream. Nothing remained but the single line—*The drift of the snow has exhausted itself in its color and there's nothing left to go anywhere.*

“Yes,” she thought. Then suddenly another line.

Laughter comes from where his sharp word because it snows and snows.

“Yes,” she thought, even more forcefully.

IT HAD STARTED DRIZZLING before Unn realized it. “Is that drizzle or mist? Or snow?” she wondered.

Closing her eyes, she strained to hear the faintest sound of white surfacing the leaves and the tips of twigs on dead winter branches.

The night was cold. The powdery white would fall, pause and fall again, till the quiet earth would rest in the gentle warmth of a snow field.

By dawn the snow had stopped. The land had stopped. Unn delicately stepped through the new white world like the first person on earth.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” Töl had joined her by the window.

For a long time they stood watching the light.

“Sometimes snow makes the air warmer,” Unn commented. She’d said this but she wasn’t sure.

It was coming down hard. Yet the hardness had a quietness and to Unn the quietness did make the air seem warmer.

All along her path evergreens bowed, their branches turning a kind of silver.

She threw back her head and stuck out her tongue. The snow, still falling, merely trickled down her tongue without congealing into water.

“Now there’s snow here,” she muttered, massaging a spot on her chest. A little puddle was forming between her breasts.

“It’s not cold though.” Actually she wasn’t sure. The wetness had been a shock but it had quickly warmed to her body.

Even as it dribbled down past her ribs and onto her waist, the thought arose—*it’s almost spring.*

While snow had fallen intermittently during the day by dusk it had cleared.

The air definitely felt warm.

As if its light were sitting close to the water, hugging the water, yet falling quietly away.

Later it snowed again. Eventually that too stopped and the next day was clear and pleasant. Unn wiped some slush off a bench and sat down.

Three birds had flown across the sky flapping their wings as they passed overhead, but when she looked up there was nothing.

Then she heard a kite. Her eyes—she'd tried to place it, but instead of the kite she saw a round empty shell like that of a former animal's body.

Though small it was beautiful in dark mottled colors.

Yet it hardly seemed like anything. *There's no sign that it has ever been anything.*

It came over her in a flash.

The sky was blank.

Maybe the sky's tired, she concluded. *Anyway it will change.*

Walk at Sea, March End

SEEING SPRING SUNLIGHT FLOODING THROUGH THE WINDOW, UNN BOUNDED UP. The inexplicable oppressiveness that had lingered with her for days was gone.

Along with the cold weather. Though the maples carried but a touch of new green, in the morning air—“They’re blossoming alright!”

Beneficence had emerged. In the leaves. In the sky. It seemed to float on a soft wind toward the sea.

Whatever forces had been in store for her, that had tried to touch her darkly, that had already begun to touch her darkly, had somehow receded.

The next day Unn rose early. To sit in the quiet air. The sound of the air, early, very early, had a riper quality than later air.

Indeed the room, bathed in subdued light, was intensely silent, which Unn enjoyed.

A leaf she had been watching kept aimlessly turning. "I know this leaf . . ." but the thought yielded to a sort of mute presence of the day.

As if its body has turned to day.

Then it fell outside the stimulus of itself so that it was no longer day but simply a knowing in its body.

“It’s spring!” Unn shouted.

Clouds were scudding. Five or six pigeons cut a low diagonal across the park.

They were huddled in a group but facing different directions, scouring for food apparently.

She sensed an indescribable oldness in the undulations of the birds’ bellies.

Even the wrinkly sea it seemed would speak to oldness.

With the pigeons themselves strutting about, one might say *pulled*, their gestures seemed irrelevant.

The sadness at first was sadness for the birds but then it came to be directed at Unn herself.

Becoming old, having had your experiences, you want them to stay long in you, to dwell in you so that you may become pure.

Yet she found their beauty cold. And they left a sense of coldness. After they’d flown off, the place where they’d been felt to Unn almost prohibitive.

That night, walking north along the shore, even the color of the water made her shiver.

One very white pigeon with elegant brown markings swaggered through the chilly air.

The helplessness of the bird imprisoned in its body—Unn stopped for a moment to get the full import of its body.

Watching its nervous, directionless jerks, it seemed to her that within the limits of its intelligence it knew that it was helpless, without the self-consciousness of knowing.

The knowing simply was, like its feathers knew and its beak. Like a wild creature exists in the full capacity of its knowing.

The previous day Unn had seen a crippled butterfly

Beside a path below a hill it had been hobbling along, or rather hopping. Its hopping seemed like hobbling because the insect lacked a wing.

“It’s a baby.” Its single but complete wing had all the markings of a Monarch.

She’d crouched to see it clearly. “Might its wings be so tightly shut that they merely appear to be single?”

To her it seemed that the shadings were different.

“That butterfly is maimed,” she said, as she again stood up. The felt sense of what that must be remained in her body.

Even now, standing on her porch, seeing the slender threads of rain vanish in the earth leaving no trace, she wondered.

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The hell realm of a body born to fly but having the inability, as if the inability moved in a life of its own, like a crime or a lie seems to follow the person, usurping its mind, growing its own vocabulary of behavior.

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Later from her bed the beginnings of a storm.

Gulls skimming low over water marbled in light were no longer just gulls but the grayish wet melt of sky rising out of darkness.

From one point of view the surface of the sea looked black, but the offing was stained with pink and the mountains beyond were also a rosy pink.

Two gulls were looping around some innocuous looking whitecaps.

Eventually one flew off. Unn had expected the other one to follow but it simply climbed a little higher and continued circling.

At the Edge of Day, Daffodils

THE FIRST THING UNN SAW THIS GLORIOUS APRIL MORNING was the sun shining through her curtains. In an opening made by the breeze she could see a patch of sky drifting lazily through the trees.

She saw, she felt, the warm brightness of a winter sun full with the burst of spring.

She could hear it. Inside the sun. Indeed the sound seemed to change as she placed her attention there.

It wasn't so much a sound as an absence of something, as if behind the sun's brightness something was missing.

Perhaps the sun had so given itself to spring, had so emptied itself to spring.

From somewhere upstairs came the scampering of a child's feet. Back and forth, back and forth, and in the energy that would crescendo just before it stopped there also was an absence, but this absence was not the same as the absence in the sun that even with the child's clatter was present to her.

Her room had a freshness about it, like the end of a spring storm. In the depth of its light she heard the sound of the sun soften.

As spring came gradually, day by day, despite a still lingering frost, Unn found herself *thinking* spring, as if it were already established.

“It’s just a prettiness to things,” she heard herself musing.

It was less the hills and the color of the sky than the touch of light, its sweet, palliative freshness that so aroused her.

Frisky clouds sailed over the sun. The light would dim and again shine clear and each time its clarity—and the impossibility of anything other than this clarity.

As she had thus been thinking, sparrows had been chirping.

A large fat bee, almost too fat, appeared to be resting. Or was it dying. It was in a corner in a patch of shade.

Its black and yellow stripes were loud though the bee itself, already the dust from the corner would be enveloping it.

But it was still moving. The legs and feelers were trembling slightly. Something about the motion, however, suggested wind, something dead in wind.

The body had no volition. Its light had gone out. What had looked like trembling was simply wind in its fur.

She stared at the bee whose body seemed stiff. None of the insects were paying it the slightest attention.

The bee was definitely dead. And had been for several days.

The fact that she hadn't noticed carried a certain vacancy.

The blank left by the vacancy would probably stay on in her body.

The blank left by the vacancy. If a person's character is formed by his or her experience, wouldn't what one hadn't experienced, what one had the opportunity to experience but hadn't, or maybe had but had forgotten, wouldn't that also be a formative factor?

Forgetting an experience would not have the same consequence as missing the experience, however.

Some purplish stems, almost too vertical, seemed to be straining upwards.

Something about their skinniness and almost armored fierceness. "Those flowers look hungry," she railed.

A snippet from a dream: A flock of birds landing on snow, stark black wings against bright bleached snow.

“Were they hungry?” They would be beautiful anyway. But beneath the breathtaking image of their bodies . . .

“*Now* how many I wonder.” Unn had spied another mushroom, its white button cap hidden by a flower it had sprung up under.

She had come to view the cherries. From the blue sky framed by young leaves—“bristling” was the word that came to her to describe their crisp yet sweet little arch upwards.

Over the years she had stared at them absently.

One tree—why had she not noticed it—huge graceful blossoms floated up around the smaller ones creating a dark outline.

Was it their sumptuous life or imminent death that clouded her heart and therefore her perception of this utterly dazzling day.

As if she saw the day and simultaneously saw the ghost of the day.

Unn remained motionless.

Double blossoms were swaying in great bunches in wind. The black austerity of the branches exaggerated the pale flowers tinged by clusters of buds.

Though subtle, she could clearly make out each star-shaped center marked with sharp pink lines.

“That must be where the sun is setting.” At one place the haze was a warm, clear pink. She saw, she felt, a bright spring day tapering off into a kind of blankness.

“Does the mind in a moment of dying taper off into a kind of blankness?”

An image from a book floated through her mind. Blood from Kikuko’s nose had fallen into a bowl of water.

As Shingo had poured it out, he’d watched the reddish traces swirl around the basin.

To him their pinks seemed artificial.

Sunny Day, Spring

THE LATE DUSK OF A LONG MAY AFTERNOON had already spread across the pines and eucalyptus as Unn, home from a walk, pushed away a sense of unrest.

“It’s backwards again,” she muttered, noting that one of her three prayer wheels was spinning the wrong way.

It was turning to the left, counter-clockwise, whereas for the prayers to be chanted properly, it needed to turn to the right.

Not that it kept turning in the same direction at the same speed. Sometimes it went a little faster or a little slower. Sometimes it simply stopped, then re-began its strained, backwards movement.

Narrow lacy wings and its exceedingly slender body, still in almost-summer air, but its “still,” she felt, was full of movement.

Its black and blue and leaf-green coloring held the wait in a pass.

“Try standing,” he’d instructed.

“Quick. It’s about to take off,” she’d whispered, motioning him to her side. Its huge multifaceted eyes met at the back of its head. Apparently its wings, long and thin, beat alternately for better control.

She felt the soft warmth of his arm next to her arm awaken in her body just as it flew away.

“Okay. I’m standing.”

She missed the bird, she realized, watching it “check” maybe one last time for its former flower. She too had been charmed by the beauty of the yellow blossoms.

Which had been replaced, first by nothing and then by a plant not nearly so showy. “Yet even when there’d been nothing, the bird had returned.” She said this aloud so as to convince herself.

Because she had been so touched. The perspective of a bird previously had not occurred to her.

Was it the same bird?

During the period of the less showy plant she had noticed what appeared to be a robin, land, look around, then lightly hop over the hanging pot’s rim. One could only imagine that she’d laid an egg and was carefully warming it. A second bird too would take her place occasionally.

Then they’d vanished. A long time later Unn had found an abandoned shell. “I should look up the size of a robin’s egg versus a sparrow’s egg.”

Immediately she wondered if she hadn’t already done that. She could almost taste the motions of

having already done that.

She stood for a moment trying to dredge up the memory, but she could remember neither the time nor the outcome. It was as if it had never happened.

A wave of revulsion for her forgetfulness passed over her.

Though she knew that the action, if indeed it had happened, could not be passed over, that nothing is passed over, she nonetheless could not get rid of the feeling.

For a second she remembered a dream. There was water and sky and she'd been naming the several blue colors that she could see.

The clear sky to the west, the birds skimming low.

The presence of the bird, the smell of bird, here and there over the ground that yielded under her.

The sun had shone dimly on the spot, a mountain setting near a fen.

Hearing the birds, the sadness in the sky, as if she were hearing her own internal sadness because the sky had been so touched by her.

The place of touch exists in sky, later, after the birds go home.

What is the end of its endlessly touched hollowness?

The sun was high. A songbird in a tree was making pleasant sounds. A shallow, swift-running creek propelling itself forward and downward in her body, was, she thought, a strikingly beautiful blue.

“Blue like the mountain bluebird.” In the dream she’d said this aloud. The blue in the bird had become a palette of different blues that the artist was mixing “to make the bird a thrush.”

Many birds had become the one bird then.

“How many birds may fit into a bird?”

“What could it mean to say that birds ‘become’ or ‘fit’ into one another?”

One bird was walking under water making small flicking movements with its wings. It also walked along the creekbed gripping firmly onto stones with its large claws.

Sunny Day, Spring

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