

Wings

Inspired by Yeonmi Park's "In Order to Live"

Kangwon Province, North Korea.

She is five years old.

Washing clothes by the river near home,
She hears a sudden rustle in the leaves
And sprints to the nearest tall tree—
Refuses to let loose a pinch of air
Before silence retakes its place in the woods.

Silence, unraveling the fist of fear,
Retrieves her breaths from its sticky palm
And coaxes them back into her throat.

Only a bird would let the leaves rustle so.
What kind of bird? It doesn't matter
Because she doesn't wish to find out.

All she knows is that birds kill.

*Keep quiet around the birds—
Even they will listen to what you say.*
She wears her mother's warning like an outgrown shirt
That tightens around her more each day,
Tastes it like some bitter medicine
Too stubborn to leave her little tongue.

Where she dwells is heaven. This she is sure of.

She never questions most things. She is five years old,
When everything she learns, like counting, like adding,
Are true without needing reasons for proof.

She is sure of this also:

Birds kill because birds listen,
And anyone who listens can kill.

Five years later.

Wonsunim. Marshal.
He is the monument she scrubs at daybreak,
The framed picture that smiles in her living room,
The songs she has sung since she spoke her first words.
He is celebration and glory, everywhere and God.
Each time she sees His face, she wonders
If He will answer not only to the prayers she utters

But also to the wishes she buries underneath.

She wonders if He understands
Why she wishes not to rise so early
To weed the train tracks before school
And let her labor uniform scratch her skin,
Let her knees hurt from all the crouching.

Or why she hates dance practice outdoors
That lasts for months and carries on into the winter
When everyone practices to perfection
To rejoice in His sacred day of birth
While she, in the same outfit she wore in summer,
Marvels that she still hasn't frozen to death
As her limbs heavy as stone
Try to struggle out of numbness,
The sky pelting snow at her in endless mockery.

She doesn't forget the one time her voice
Gave life to her harbored thoughts:
She will never forget
The look on her teacher's face,
A face not flushed in anger or gray with disappointment
But one so warped and cracked with fear
It would've shattered to pieces with a single touch.
It seemed to be urging what her mother had said
About the danger of opinion, especially your own.

She wonders if He understands her secret wishes
And decides that He does—
Trusts that He does—
For He, if no one else, is fearless.

Five years later.

Laughter the escape of dandelion seeds
That fly out everywhere in a flurry.
Movement the song of a freshwater stream
With currents gliding in a language of calm.
Heart the warmth of a sip of hot tea
On a morning gripped by the claws of frost.

The trove of these treasures is her best friend Dal,
Whom one could never imagine to be up to no good.
Yet Dal, in her innocent single-story cottage
On a day they spend together like any other,
Plunges her voice into a volume almost inaudible.

Listen carefully.
I can tell you things forbidden.
Do you wish to know what is true of this country?

*If you do, you may be put in danger. No—
You will.*

The girl feels her heart plummet to her stomach.
But she nods that she wishes so.
Risks and dangers scare her less
Than does the fear that the truth she faces
Will cause her buried wishes to tremor in her chest
Until they erupt from her lips unrestrained.

Dal uncovers round disks,
Three of them.
She is even quieter than before when she whispers,

Smuggled from the South.

The South. The South,
Still wrecked and impoverished from the war seventy years ago.
Textbooks display orphans weeping
In tattered clothes and run-down hovels.
The girl has learned that those wretched souls
Find help in the North's benevolent hand,
Which bears money, food, shelter.
It is a blessing to be living away from the horrors there.

Everything South-made must be avoided
Lest it bring down the North and its glory.
Southern content is poison to the mind, they say,
And the girl hears her veins tremble
With the intrusion of criminal venom
That threatens to burst every vessel in its way.
Trust is the deadliest thing on Earth
But with every accusing beat of her heart,
She knows she can trust Dal.

They watch what is called a drama.

A drama, so things must be fictional.
The people in the screen feasting
On noodles, cakes, unrecognizable foods
With nonchalant faces must be actors
Playing the part of the wealthy,
The infinite cars are not real, and
Neither are the phones or the colors or the nice houses and
The endless electricity must be fiction too and
The clothes the buildings the smiles the
Fake they're all fake fiction lies all lies.

She doesn't know when she began muttering and stuttering.
She doesn't know when her heart will stop convulsing
Or her well-concealed wishes stop growing louder in her head

Or her eyes stop seeing the bird from years ago
The bird she never dared to see but whom she sees now,
A killer, a beast, a monster. *Keep quiet. Keep quiet around the birds.*
Except the bird has already heard her. The bird has found her.

When her senses return
She finds herself curled in her own home,
Shuddering, breathing hard from running.
She doesn't remember leaving Dal's house
But she is beginning to wonder if anything is real.

Two weeks later.

She and her classmates have been led
Out of the school and into the square,
And the girl sees that each of her classmates
Wears one of only two expressions:
Confused or grim.
She wears the former.

They are not the only ones there:
Just about the entire district crowds the area.
But the verb is too inapt, too raucous to describe
The eerie silence that freezes over the gathering.

What is happening?

At the very front, a man yells
Something unintelligible but serious.
Then men in uniforms
March to the center of the front, their backs to the assembly.
She sees rifles.
Just part of their uniform, probably.

Silence reclaims its grip on the people.

This is probably quite an important ceremony, she thinks.
Then her heart is run through by a thick spear of ice
When people wearing blindfolds and filthy clothes
Are dragged so that they stand facing the men.

She is too terrified to react. She tells herself
What she is picturing will not happen.
But her heart stops when her eyes land on holes
Dug between each uniformed man and prisoner.

Silence. Silence all around.

Then clicks sound. They aim their rifles.
What I am picturing—
Another commanding yell, and her eyes clench shut.

The bullets split the square.
—*Will not happen.*

She has to force her eyes open.
A heavy stone is lodged in her chest. She cannot breathe.
The prisoners are falling. Two, three blindfolds slide down
From foreheads spilling a horrible red.

Then she sees her among the collapsing prisoners
Right before she is swallowed by the hole.
Even from a distance, her shape, her clothes, cannot be mistaken.

I can tell you things forbidden.

The square crumbles and reassembles and goes up in flames.
Her teachers twist into giants with mouths large and hideous
That bellow and roar and deliver life's truths.
The celebratory songs drown in screams
Of people with families and memories and love
Begging and wailing for mercy
From punishment they must face for no reason at all.
The smiling face of her beloved deity
Keeps his smile as the country suffers.
His selfless and glorious image is destroyed
By her loudening perception that his fearlessness
Doesn't make him understand her defiant wishes
But rather fuels his ruthlessness, his cruelty, his apathy.
His monument topples and crumbles.
Her eyes fly open.

The people, the square, the world, all silent.
Her face threatens to fracture
But holds itself together with every bit of strength
For fear of what would become of her fate.

One year later.

Washing clothes by the river near home,
She hears a sudden rustle in the leaves.
She sees her younger selves,
Five, ten, fifteen years old,
Scramble to the same tall tree nearby,
Leaving a scent of fear in their wake.

She does not follow.
She turns to where the rustle was heard
And watches as a sparrow soars overhead
Until it disappears into the distant blue.

An ordinary sparrow,
Yet her memory paints a moment at which

Gold flecks whispered across its feathers.
Wings that glittered beautifully,
Alive with freedom.
She could fly anywhere.

The girl sees little of the full truth.
Understanding reality is beyond her.
But when she sees a bird in flight,
She is certain it is real.