

I

Crystals

A sparse snow was falling.

I stood on flat land that edged up a low hill. Along the brow of this hill and down its visible face to the seam of the plain, thousands of black tree trunks jutted from the earth. They varied in height, like a crowd of people ranging in age, and were about as thick as railway sleepers, though nowhere near as straight. Stooped and listing, they gave the impression of a thousand men, women and haggard children huddling in the snow.

Was this a graveyard? I wondered. Are these gravestones?

I walked past the torsos – treetops lopped off, exposed cross sections stippled with snowflakes that resembled salt crystals; I passed the prostrating barrows behind them. My feet stilled as I noticed the sensation of water underfoot. That's strange, I thought. Within moments the water

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was up to my ankles. I looked back. What I saw astonished me: the far horizon turned out to be the shoreline. And the sea was crashing in.

The words tumbled from my lips: Who would bury people in such a place?

The current was strong. Had the tide surged in and out like this each day? Were the lower mounds hollowed out, the bones long since swept away?

There was no time. The graves already underwater were out of reach, but the remains higher up the slope, I needed to move them to safety. Now, before the sea encroached further. But how? There was no one around. I had no shovel. How would I get to them all? At a loss, I ran through the thicket of black trees, knees cleaving the rising water.

When I opened my eyes, the day had yet to break. The snowy field, the black torsos, the flood tide were gone; the only thing that met my stare was the window of my darkened room. I shut my eyes. Another dream about G—, it had to be. At this thought, I covered my lids with the cold palm of my hand and lay there unmoving.



The dream had come to me in the summer of 2014, a couple of months after the publication of my book about the massacre in G—. Over the next four years, it had never occurred to me to question the dream's connection to that city. But this summer I began to wonder if there might be something more to it. If my quick, intuitive conclusion had either been in error or an oversimplification.

The sweltering night heat hadn't let up for three weeks. Once again, I was lying under the broken air conditioner in my sitting room, hoping for sleep. I'd already taken several cold showers, but though I lay on the bare floor, my sweat-drenched body wouldn't cool. Finally, around five in the morning, the temperature began to drop. It was to be a brief grace, as the sun would be up in another half-hour. But I felt I might sleep at last, and had in fact nearly drifted off, when the plain rolled in beneath my closed lids: snow scattering over rows of black timber; glimmering snowflakes studding the severed torsos like salt; all of it before my eyes, as vivid as day.

I don't know what set it off, the shaking. My body seemed to be racked by sobs, though my eyes remained dry. Was this terror? Or anxiety,

agitation, perhaps an abrupt anguish? No, it was a bone-chilling awareness. That a giant, invisible knife – the weight of its heavy blade beyond any human capacity to wield it – hung in the air, with me as its target. As I lay pinned and staring.

The black-blue sea billowing in to dredge the bones away from beneath the mounds – it occurred to me for the first time that this might not be an allusion to the massacred people and the decades that followed. It could simply be a personal omen. Yes, perhaps that landscape of flooded graves and silent headstones was an intimation brought forward in time, a sign of what remained of my life to come.

This very moment, in other words.



In the four years between the first time I had the dream and that early summer morning, I had parted ways with several people in my life. Some of these partings had been by choice, while others had caught me entirely unawares; I'd fought the latter with everything I had. If, as various ancient faiths say, there exists in a celestial realm or a netherworld an immense mirror that observes

and logs everyone's movements, I'm sure the last three to four years of my life as recorded there must resemble a snail coming out of its shell to push along a knife's edge. A body desiring to live. A body pricked and nicked. A body spurning, embracing, clinging. A body kneeling. A body entreating. A body seeping blood or pus or tears.

Then in late spring of this year, with the struggle done, I had signed the lease on a flat in an open-corridor apartment complex just outside Seoul. I had no one left to take care of and no job to get to, though it would take a while for this fact to sink in. I'd worked for many years to make a living and support my family. This had always been the priority. If I wrote at all, it was by cutting back on sleep while nursing a secret hope that one day I'd be given as much time as I desired to write. But by spring any such longing had vanished.

I let my things lie wherever the movers had blithely unpacked them, and spent most of my time in bed, though I barely slept. This went on until July. I didn't cook. I didn't venture outside. I subsisted on water and small quantities of rice and white kimchi that I ordered online and

had delivered, and when the migraines and abdominal spasms hit, I vomited up what I had eaten. I'd already sat down one night and written out a will. In a letter that simply began *Please see to the following*, I had briefly noted which box in which drawer held my bank books, certificate of insurance and lease agreement, how much of my money I wished to be spent to what end, and to whom the rest of my savings should be delivered. As for the person who was to carry out this request, I drew a blank, and the space where the name of the recipient should go remained empty. I couldn't decide who, if anyone, deserved such an imposition. I tried adding a word or two of thanks and apology by saying I'd make sure to compensate them for their trouble and specifying an amount, but I still couldn't settle on a name.

What finally roused me out of the mire of my bed, after weeks of struggling to sleep, was my sense of responsibility towards this unidentified recipient. Calling to mind my few acquaintances, one of whom, though the exact person was yet to be determined, would be left to deal with any loose ends, I started putting the flat in order. The rows of empty water bottles in the kitchen, the

clothing and blankets that were sure to be a nuisance, any personal records, diaries and notes had to be discarded. With the initial bundles of trash in each hand, I slipped on a pair of trainers and opened the front door for the first time in two months. The summer sun flooded the west-facing corridor; the afternoon light was a revelation. I rode the lift down, passed by the guard's room, crossed the compound square – and felt, all the while, that I was witnessing something. The lived-in world. The day's weather. The humidity in the air and the pull of gravity.

Returning upstairs, I walked past the mounds of fabric and into the bathroom. I turned the hot water on and sat under the shower fully dressed. The tiles beneath my curled feet, the steam gradually making it hard to breathe, the cotton shirt growing heavy as it plastered against my back, the water sluicing down my forehead, and the hair which by now covered my eyes to my chin, chest, stomach: I can feel each and every sensation still.

I walked out of the bathroom, peeled off my sodden outfit, rummaged around and put on what decent clothes I could find. I folded two 10,000-won notes into little squares, slipped them into

my pocket and went outside. I walked to a juk shop behind a nearby subway station and ordered what seemed the mildest item on their menu, a pine-nut juk. I took my time with the unduly hot bowl of rice porridge and, as I did, people walked past the window in bodies that looked fragile enough to shatter. Life was exceedingly vulnerable, I realized. The flesh, organs, bones, breaths passing before my eyes all held within them the potential to snap, to cease – so easily, and by a single decision.

That is how death avoided me. Like an asteroid thought to be on a collision course avoids Earth by a hair's breadth, hurtling past at a furious velocity that knows neither regret nor hesitation.



I had not reconciled with life, but I had to resume living.

Close to two months of seclusion and near-starvation had left me with considerable muscle loss. To break the cycle of migraines, stomach spasms and caffeine-rich painkillers, I needed to

eat and move with regularity. But before I could attempt anything in earnest, the heatwave set in. On the first day the mercury climbed past our average body temperature, I turned on the air conditioner the previous tenant had left behind, only to discover it was broken. When my calls to various AC repair companies finally got through, I was invariably told that they were inundated with requests at the moment due to the extreme weather and the earliest anyone could pay a visit was in late August. Buying a new AC unit wasn't any easier.

The wise thing would have been to seek shelter in cool indoor spaces. But I couldn't face being around other people in cafés or libraries or banks. So I did what I could: lie plastered on the sitting-room floor and try to keep my body temperature down, take frequent cold-water showers to prevent heat exhaustion, and venture outside for some juk around eight o'clock when the swelter had dissipated somewhat. The shop's conditioned air was incredibly pleasant, while outside, past the windows that were as steamed up as on a winter's night, people surged forward, each clutching a portable fan aimed at their face

as they headed home for the night. Filling the tropical-night streets whose heat, like eternity, wouldn't let up, and which in due time I would have to re-enter.

On one of those nights, I walked out of the shop and stopped at a crossing, where I felt a rush of hot air on my face from the still-warm asphalt. I had to resume my letter, I thought. No, I had to start afresh. I would write a new note to replace the missive addressed to no one, the one I'd slipped into an envelope marked 'Last Will' in permanent ink. I would start from scratch. I would change tack.



But to write it, I first had to think.

When had everything begun to fall apart?

Where was the fork in the road?

Which rift and which break had been the tipping point?

There are people who brandish their sharpest weapon as they are taking their leave. We know this from experience. They do this so as to slice

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the tenderest part of the person they are leaving
with the precision that proximity grants us.

I don't want to live face down on the ground like you.

I'm leaving you so I can breathe.

I want to live, not be half-dead.



I started having nightmares in the winter of 2012, after I began researching the book I went on to write. Initially these were dreams of outright violence. Running from airborne troops, being bludgeoned on the shoulder, falling to the ground. I can't recall the face of the uniformed man who kicked me in the flank as I lay sprawled on the ground and turned me over with his boots. What I do remember is the shudder that ran through me when he grabbed his gun with both hands and pushed the bayonet into my chest.

Not wanting to cast a gloom over my family – my daughter, especially – I found a writing space a fifteen-minute walk away from home. The plan was to limit my writing to that place and to return to daily life the moment I left it. The room was

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on the first floor of a brick house that had been built in the 1980s and hadn't seen any repairs in three decades. I bought a tin of white water-based paint and daubed it over the heavily scratched metal door, then I hung a scarf above the room's window to obscure the crack in the old wooden frame. From nine in the morning until noon on the days when I had classes to teach, and until five o'clock on the days when I didn't, I went there to read materials I'd gathered or to make notes.

In the mornings and evenings, I continued to cook meals and sit down to eat with my family. I tried to have as many conversations as I could with my daughter, who had just started middle school and was encountering new situations at every turn. But I felt split in half. Even within those private moments, I could sense the shadow of the book lurking – when I turned on the gas ring and waited for the water in the pot to boil, or in the brief time it took to dredge tofu slices in egg wash and watch them crisp up on both sides.

The writing space was reached by a path running along a stream, and there was a section where the heavily tree-lined path sloped down before suddenly opening up. I had to walk across

that exposed tract of land for about three hundred metres to reach the empty lot under the bridge that doubled as a roller rink. This distance seemed insurmountable, for while I skittered over it, I was entirely vulnerable and defenceless. I imagined snipers lying in wait on the rooftops flanking the single-lane road opposite, rifles aimed at the people below. I knew of course that this was nonsensical, that it was only my anxiety talking.

One night in late spring of 2013, as my insomnia worsened and my breathing became increasingly shallow – ‘Why must you breathe like that?’ my daughter had complained to me one day – I was startled awake around one o’clock from a nightmare. Giving up on sleep altogether, I went outside to buy some water. There wasn’t anyone about, not even a passing car, which made the traffic lights seem redundant. But I stood and waited for the signal to turn green, my mind drifting as I gazed at the blazing twenty-four-hour convenience store on the other side of the two-lane road that led to the apartment complex. When I refocused, there was a line of about thirty men walking single file along the opposite pavement. Their hair was long, they were in

reserve-forces uniform, and though each carried a shoulder rifle, they dawdled like tired children on a school excursion, their feet dragging and their postures slack and undisciplined.

When someone who hasn't slept soundly in a while, who is stumbling through a period of nightmares blurring with reality, chances across a scene that defies belief, they may well initially doubt themselves. Am I actually seeing this? Surely this must be part of my nightmare? And: How much can I trust my own senses?

The men were enveloped in a hushed silence, as though someone had hit the mute button on the scene unfolding before me. I remained still, following their backs with my eyes until the last one disappeared round the murky crossroads. It wasn't a dream. I wasn't the least bit drowsy and I hadn't been drinking. But neither could I quite believe what I'd seen. I told myself the men may be out on night training, as after all there was a reserve-forces training area in Naegok-dong, just past Umyeonsan. However, that would imply that the men had marched a dozen kilometres over the hill at this late hour and in the pitch dark. Whether this was commensurate training for a reserve troop, I didn't

know. The next morning, I felt a strong urge to call any of my acquaintances who had done their mandatory service to ask if it was, but I also didn't want to be considered eccentric, as I felt I was being. To this day, I have not breathed a word of that night to anyone.



Alongside women unknown to me, I climbed down the well, helping them to hold on to their children. We thought it would be safe down there, but without warning a shower of bullets rained down on us from above. The women clasped the children against their bodies, shielding them as best they could. From the bottom of what we'd thought was a dry well, a grassy liquid, viscous like melted rubber, oozed out and quickly rose around us. Engulfing our blood and our screams.



I was walking along a deserted road with some companions whose faces I cannot recall. We came across a black passenger car parked on

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the shoulder, and someone said, He's in there. No name was mentioned, but we understood immediately that the one who had ordered the massacre that spring was in the car. As we stood watching, the car pulled away and turned on to the premises of a large stone building. Someone said, We should follow. We headed towards the building. There were several of us when we set out, but by the time we stepped inside the empty building, only two of us, including myself, remained. Someone stood quietly by my side. I sensed that the person was a man, and that he seemed to be following me reluctantly. We were only two – what could two people possibly do? Light leaked from a room at the end of the dim hall. When we stepped inside, the mass murderer was standing with his back to a wall. He held a lighted match in one hand. That's when I realized that my companion and I were each holding a match as well. We could speak for as long as the matches burned. No one had told us, but we knew that was the rule. The murderer's match was almost burned out, the flame down to his thumb. Our matches remained but were burning fast. Murderer, I thought I should say. I opened my mouth.

Murderer.

My voice refused to come out.

Murderer.

Louder, I had to speak louder.

What are you going to do about all the people you've killed? I said, using every last ounce of energy I had.

Then I wondered if we were supposed to kill him now, if this would be the last chance any of us had. But how? How could we possibly? I glanced to my side and saw the orange flame of my companion's frail matchstick – my companion of faint face and breath – wane. In that light I sensed with vivid clarity how young the keeper of that match was. He was only a gangling boy.



I finished the manuscript and visited my publisher in January of the following year. I wanted to ask that they publish the book as quickly as possible. For I'd thought, foolishly, that once it was out, the nightmares would cease. My editor told me it would be better in terms of promotion to push the launch to May.

Wouldn't it be best to time the release so that

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one more person is likely to pick it up? they asked.

I was persuaded by those words. While I waited, I rewrote another chapter of the book. Then it was the editor's turn to rush me, until I at last handed in the final manuscript in April. The book came out almost to the day in mid May. The nightmares, unsurprisingly, continued regardless. In retrospect it baffles me. Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively – brazenly – hoped to soon shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces?



Then there is the night I awoke from that black forest and covered my eyes with the palm of my cold hand.

Sometimes, with some dreams, you awake and sense that the dream is ongoing elsewhere. This dream is like that. As I eat my meals, drink my tea, ride the bus, walk hand in hand with my child, pack our bags ahead of a trip, or walk up the countless stairs out of a subway station, to one side of me it is perpetually snowing, over a

plain I have never visited. Over black trees chopped down to torsos, dazzling hexagonal crystals form, then crumble. Startled, my feet underwater, I look back. And there it is: the sea, rushing in.

Unable to let go of this scene, which rose up repeatedly before my mind's eye, that autumn, I had a thought. I could find a suitable place and plant some logs there, as they had appeared in my dream. Planting them in the thousands might not be feasible, but ninety-nine – a number that opens to infinity – could work; and then, together with a dozen or so people of shared purpose, we could clothe the trees in black meek. Ink them with the same devotion with which one might swaddle them in gowns woven out of deep night, so that their sleep may remain eternally unbroken. And once it was all done, we could wait. Not for the sea but for snow as white as cloth to drape down from the skies and blanket them all.

And the whole process could be documented in a short film, I suggested to a friend who had worked with photographs and on documentary features before. She readily agreed. We promised to see it through to fruition together but finding the right moment in both our schedules

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wasn't easy, and before long four years had drifted by.



Then there is the heat-drenched night I walk back through the baked-asphalt air to an empty house and a cold shower. Every evening the people in the flats above and below and to either side of me turn on their ACs, and I am forced to seal shut my own doors and windows against the infernal air spewing out of their fans. I take a seat at my desk in what may as well be a steam room, before the lingering coolness of the shower evaporates. The envelope containing my will sits on the desk, still undressed. I pick it up and tear it to pieces.

Start again.

A spell that is always right, always correct.

I start again. Within five minutes, sweat is running down my skin. I take another cold shower; I return to the desk. I rip up the terrible note I wrote a moment ago.

Start again.

Write a proper letter of farewell, a true leave-taking.

The previous summer, as my private life

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began to crumble like a sugar cube dropped in water, back when the real partings that were to follow were only a premonition, I'd written a story titled 'Farewell', a story about a woman of snow who melts away under sleet. But that can't be my actual, final farewell.

Whenever the sweat stung my eyes too much to continue, I returned to the shower. Back at the desk, I'd shred what I'd written. When I eventually laid my clammy body on the floor, with yet another letter I had to begin anew remaining, the day was breaking blue. Like a blessing, I felt the temperature drop by a fraction. I thought I might be able to get some rest at last and was in fact half asleep, when the snow began drifting over the plain. A snow that seemed to have been falling for decades – no, centuries.



They're still safe.

That is what I told myself as I stared in defiance at the snowy field, refusing to turn away from the awareness that gripped me like a heavy, suspended blade.

The trees planted along the ridge to the top of the hill were safe, being outside the reach of the flood tide. The graves behind the copse were also safe, as the sea couldn't rise that high. The white bones of the hundreds buried there remained cool, clean and dry. The waves couldn't steal them away. Black trees stood their ground under falling snow, their bases neither wet nor rotting. A snow that had been falling for decades – no, centuries.

That's when I knew.

That I had to go, that I had to turn my back on the bones lower down, which were already lost to the billows. I had to head to the crest, before it was too late, parting the livid water that was now up to my knees. Waiting for no one, trusting no help would come, without hesitation, all the way up the brow. Up where I could see white snow crystals breaking over the woods.

There was no time.

It was the only way, that is
if I wanted to go on.

Go on living.

2

Threads

But I still had trouble sleeping.

I could barely eat.

My breath remained shallow.

I continued in the manner that those who left me had said they couldn't bear to witness.

The summer in which the world attempted to speak to me, relentlessly and at overwhelming volume, was over. I no longer had to sweat at every turn. I no longer had to lie on the floor, my body slack and listless. I no longer had to take endless cold showers.

A desolate boundary had formed between the world and me. I found a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, put them on and walked up the road, where the muggy air had lifted, to the juk shop. I still couldn't cook. Couldn't stomach more than one

meal a day. Mostly I couldn't bear to remember what it was like to cook for or to share a meal with someone. But routine did return. I continued to meet no one and answer no calls, but I resumed checking my emails and phone messages with regularity. Every morning, at dawn, I sat at the desk and wrote, each time from scratch, a letter of farewell addressed to everyone.

By degrees night lengthened. With each day I noticed a cooling in the air. For the first time since I'd moved here, I went for a walk along the trail just behind the complex. It was early November and the tall maple trees were ablaze and glimmering in the sunlight. Beauty – but the wiring inside me that would sense beauty was dead or failing. One morning, the first frost of the season covered the half-frozen earth, and as the soles of my trainers touched the ground, I heard dry crunching. Brittle autumn leaves as big as young faces tumbled past me, and the limbs of the suddenly denuded plane trees, as their Korean name of *buhzeum* – flaking skin – suggests, resembled grey-white flesh stripped raw.



On that late December morning when I received Inseon's text message, I was on my way back from the trail. After a month of sub-zero temperatures, the hardwood trees had dropped all their leaves.

Kyungha-ya.

That was the entirety of her message: my name.

I met Inseon the year I graduated. I was hired by a magazine where the editors mostly took their own photographs, as the publisher didn't have photographers on payroll, but for important interviews and travel articles we'd pair up with freelancers we'd booked ourselves. Going on the road meant as many as three nights and four days spent in company, and, on the advice of my seniors, who said it was best for women to team up with women and men with men, I called round several photo production houses until I was introduced to Inseon, who happened to be the same age as me. For the next three years we went on monthly assignments together until I left the magazine, and as we'd been friends for well over two decades, by now I knew most of her habits. When she started a conversation by calling my name, I knew she wasn't simply checking

in but had something specific and urgent she wanted to discuss.

Hi. Is everything all right?

I removed my woollen glove to send a reply, then waited. Seeing there was no answer, I was pulling the glove back on when another text arrived.

Can you come right away?

Inseon didn't live in Seoul. She was an only child, born when her mother was past forty, and thus encountered her mother's growing frailty earlier than most. Eight years ago, she returned to a mountain village in Jeju to care for her mother, whom she lost four years later; she'd remained in that house on her own ever since. Prior to that, Inseon and I used to drop by each other's place all the time to cook and eat together and to catch up, but what with the physical distance and each of us having to deal with life's curveballs, our visits grew less frequent and further apart. Eventually the interval grew to an entire year, then two. My most recent trip to Jeju was in autumn of the previous year. During the four days I stayed with her, in the unassuming stone house with its exposed wooden beams, a house that had been renovated only to the extent of having a toilet fitted indoors,

she introduced me to a pair of small white budgies she'd brought home two years ago from one of the markets that opened every five days. One of the pair could even say a simple word or two. Then she led me across the yard to her carpentry workshop, where she said she spent the better part of her day. She showed me the chairs she'd made from tree stumps, planed but without any joinery. These sold fairly well for some reason and helped her make ends meet. Sit down, feel how comfortable it is, she urged. Later she threw some wild mulberries and raspberries in a kettle and made me a sour and rather bland tea over the wood stove. She'd picked the berries that summer in the woods above her place. While I drank the tea, grumbling about its taste, Inseon in her jeans and work shoes tied her hair firmly back, stuck a mechanical pencil behind her ear like some master artisan featured in a TV documentary, and got to work measuring and drawing lines on a board with a set square.

She couldn't mean come to her Jeju house. *Where are you?* I asked in my next text, just as Inseon's message arrived. It was the name of a hospital in Seoul, though one I wasn't familiar with. Then came the same question as before.

Can you come right away?

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Then another message.

Bring ID.

I wondered if I should stop by my place first. I had on a long puffer coat that was two sizes too big, but at least it was clean. The wallet in my pocket contained a credit card I could use to withdraw cash, along with my ID card. I was halfway to the next subway station and the taxi rank there when I saw a free cab approach and waved it down.



The first thing I saw was the black lettering on the grimy banner boasting *Nation's Best*. I paid the fare and walked towards the hospital entrance, wondering why, if it really was the nation's best in surgical wound closures, I had never heard of the place before. I passed through the revolving door into a dimly lit lobby with worn finishing. On one wall there were some photographs of a hand and a foot, each missing a finger and a toe. I wanted to look away but forced myself to cast my eyes over them. Knowing my memory might distort the images into something more fearsome, I thought I may as well look. But I was wrong;

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these photographs grew more painful the closer I observed them. My eyes reluctantly moved on to the next set of photos: the same hand and foot, now with sutured-on finger and toe. There was a marked difference in skin tone and texture on either side of the suture lines.

I realized Inseon must have had a similar accident in her workshop, that that must be why she was here.

There are people who actively change the course of their own life. They make daring choices that others seldom dream of, then do their utmost to be accountable for their actions and the consequences of those actions. So that in time, no matter what life path they strike out on, people around them cease to be surprised. After studying photography in college, Inseon developed an interest in documentary film-making in her late twenties and spent a decade steadily pursuing this badly paid profession. She of course took on any directing work that came her way to make ends meet, but as whatever money she made was rerouted back into her own films, she was always broke. She ate little, spent little and worked a lot. She packed a simple lunch wherever she went, wore no make-up and cut her own hair using a