
Writings on H | Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

WRITINGS ON H

Author's Note

It is easier to spend time trying to understand others than ourselves. Sometimes I wonder if that is, truly, what we as social workers have in common: not what we are running toward, but what we are running from.

Observations like “many of us in the field are women*” and “many of us are in romantic entanglements where we give more” are interesting because they may be an ouroboros: two facts that are actually one. Perhaps we have not fully understood ourselves as women, as lovers, as social work professionals and because of this are creating a system that traps us across all domains of our lives. Perhaps we are the snake that consumes itself.

I want to point to writers like Ocean Vuong who give me hope. Writers who suggest that time and history exist as a spiral. Humans repeat a fairly limited range of mistakes. And yet as long as we are moving farther from the epicenter and closer to the edges, to a better way, perhaps, then, we may be moving in the right direction.

This piece is a work in progress. It is a series of translations. It is about myself and the social work women in my life. It is as much avoidance of self-reflection as it is self-reflection. It is an attempt, if not to disrupt the ouroboros, then to illuminate it.

*My use of woman/women here does not make claims as to the definition of womanhood or who qualifies as a woman. It is, instead, thinking about social work professionals who feel an affinity with the label and find themselves grappling with the implications of how

womanhood—or a conception of womanhood—impacts the way one moves in the world.

Every time I think of H a swan appears unannounced in my mind, like a flag. Who is standing holding the flag I don't know. But with H there is always the unknowable figure of a swan: long white neck, lips as if suddenly dipped in golden paint, glimmering.

It's not that I have a particular fondness for swans or have seen or read about any swans during the time I have known H. Still, I think them, like a lie: as much as I try to deny them, they stay the same.

One October night I was in class when my professor suddenly told us a story about cranes. White cranes, tall cranes, ends of wings bursting into red flame cranes. *Right about now if you look up to the sky you can see them, he says. Unlike other birds there's no way to tell which direction they're coming from because the entire sky shakes with their sound.*

Cranes and swans are different. H is somewhere far away, it's been a long time since we've mixed words and all our memories are weaker now. But right now, today, I think of H. My mind shudders like a sky of invisible cranes.

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Any power one has in a relationship is determined by the other person. About how much they allow you to hold. I knew that as a scholar. And I knew that as a woman.

The truth was ugly because it was ugly, because the facts were difficult to bear: there couldn't be love that was wrong. It was wrong because it wasn't love.

In other words: I had been seduced by domination, or I had seduced through subordination. Meaning, I hadn't loved you at all.

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I went cherry blossom watching with H once. It was spring, and we were in the mountains. I got out of the car, unloosened my body and walked among the trees. Everything shone with a blinding shade of pink.

The cherry blossoms didn't slice me with questions like, where is home? which body do you prefer? on the roof of your past, what flag will you hoist?

H and I were truly the same then.

"MeeSoh, it was a good idea to come cherry blossom watching, right?"

I laughed easily, head thrown back. To always answer each of H's questions as easily—I felt my heart wishing feverishly. Two cherry blossoms came and rested on H's head. Then, in some secret moment, floated away.

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Tell me how I can make you feel better is almost good enough.

Fortunately (or unfortunately), I have been around too many books and therapies to miss what your words actually say: how can you rid yourself of the guilt that comes with wanting every part of me except for the parts that are woman? How can I give you permission to conveniently forget I am human?

Yes, the feminist thinkers were right: we "didn't want to think about the reason why we hadn't been able to convert¹ men to feminist thinking and practice."

To look on you and see the totality of who you are . . . I felt the inevitable white light and closed my eyes. The truth expanded and became night, offering no relief from my pain.

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In my mind, it is always happening again: the touch of my lover's eyes strikes me especially deeply today and I am a lake unraveling at the edge of someone's fingertips.

My lover's gaze speaks: that he will do his absolute best. That the love he has for me will be the love I feel. If not now, then soon. All we need, love, is a little more time. In the silence of that room which one of us begged more loudly I will never know.

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Though H continued to disappear, her words stayed. Like someone had waited all night washing the room with water, H's face lit my mind like moonlight through an opening.

"H, are you happy?" I asked.

H placed her gaze briefly by the window before slowly resting it at my side.

"I'm not *not* happy."

Shadows formed around my eyes at her next words.

"What is happiness, even, do you think?"

H's face was as bare as the surface of empty rooms.

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A little while later my professor shares another story involving animals.

"A scorpion and a duck try to cross the river. But there is no way the scorpion can cross the river by his strength alone. So the scorpion says, *hey, duck, won't you carry me on your back to the other side of the river?*

Incredulous, the duck replies *do you really think I'm that stupid scorpion, to let you on my back?*

He laughs a little. *No way*, he says.

The scorpion looks at the duck for a moment before saying, slyly, *Oh duck, whatever it is you're afraid of won't happen, trust me*. He then promises that if the duck were to carry him on his back, he will most certainly not sting him.

The duck is a little suspicious but the scorpion is adamant. So the duck decides just this once to put his trust in the scorpion. He carefully hoists the scorpion on his back and makes his way across the river. Sure enough, the scorpion doesn't sting him. The duck is pleasantly surprised.

When they arrive at the other side of the river, the duck looks back at the scorpion to thank him for keeping his promise. But at that moment the scorpion flashes his tail and stings the duck in the chest. The duck's heart convulses and he slowly sinks in the water.

With his final breath the duck cries out to the scorpion, "How could you? You promised."

Unblinking, the scorpion answers, "It's my nature."

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The Japanese philosopher Masahiro Morioka writes about happiness. He is interested in the modern phenomenon of SSRIs as a way of combating depression. Morioka's thought experiment: if one were to be on a perpetual supply of SSRIs and never experience any negative feelings, could one truly say they are happy?²

Morioka answers in the negative. He believes this is completely in opposition to what we know about human experience. Happiness is, for Morioka, transcendent of positive or negative feelings. It is the collection of human action that lies beyond them. It is "the attempt to overcome oneself," to "transcend one's nature"³.

Several questions clamber into my mind. Is this even possible? Is this the happiness we've been looking for? If not, should it be? What is it we've been chasing all this time?

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H will be married in a week's time. I had completely forgotten. To be able to go to her wedding was something I wanted deeply.

Whether I actually saw her there or thought of her from over here, I knew my eyes would tear. Was it because the wedding made me unhappy? Was it because I missed H, who felt so out of reach? Was it because of some other fear?

The moment I leaned toward an answer, surety squirmed and wriggled away. I think of H who will never be in a movie theater because darkness makes her fiancé anxious. I think of H who is walking away from her dream. I think of H who is perhaps walking into another one.

Something hovers like two blossoms from our past.

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1 Bell Hooks, *Communion* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2002).

2 Morioka, M. (2012). Human Dignity and the Manipulation of the Sense of Happiness. *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, 2(1). Retrieved March 16, 2018.

3 Morioka, M. (2003). *Painless Citizen*. Trasview.