

In the early morning light, a once white pony stands alone at the centre of a small rugged paddock. It is decidedly weathered, with a resigned countenance and a tufted, muddy winter coat. Its heavy equine head hangs and it seems profoundly unconcerned with the new morning evolving around it, as though invisibly blinkered. Silhouetted forms are beginning to reveal their features as the sun makes its way upwards into the sky behind a layer of cloud. The field is dotted with unpalatable broad leaved dock sporting tall brown flower spikes, around which the grass has been efficiently cropped by repeated grazing.

A large black bird is visible stretching its wings at the top of one the ash trees bordering the paddock and the small adjoining cemetery. The bird (a carrion crow) watches as a nurse arrives at the white house opposite, rings the bell, then enters. Breaking the dull silence it ventures a guttural "*Kraa kraa kraa*".

In the makeshift downstairs bedroom of the white house Alice is turned and washed with care. The grey cold morning light brings a welcome freshness to the cloistered atmosphere of the room, though with it no warmth is offered to soften the stark fragility of paper-thin skin tracing the contours of prominent bone beneath.

The atrophy of Alice's body has advanced along with the course of her dementia. No longer able to stand or speak, aside from the occasional utterance whispered with rare moments of clarity during the afternoons, her mortality is tangible. The nurse re-dresses her in a fresh nightie and tidies her fine hair with a soft bristled brush from the silver and tortoiseshell set on the little table near the bed. She replaces the brush and collects up the laundry, pausing at the window for a moment to regard the dirty white pony standing motionless near the fence opposite.

From her perspective above the paddock, a crow is also watching the pony, with shiny black eyes like plump elderberries.

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As the sun reaches its highest point in the sky Lisa turns the key in her back door, enters and kicks off her shoes with relief. She part fills the kettle and clicks it on. As it boils she washes a couple of pots left from breakfast, Picking up a little stale cake intended for the birds she slips her shoes back on and pops outdoors. She throws the cake onto the lawn and as soon as she turns her back several sparrows hop down from their tenement lodgings in the hedge to inspect her latest offering.

In the white house Alice watches the changing shadows upon the wall and ceiling in her room, cast by the origami bird mobile hanging above the foot of her bed; a gift from her niece a few months ago. She absently strokes the velvet trim of her bedspread as the moving images ignite a memory - lying carefree as a younger woman in the warm of an early summer evening and watching the swifts dive and swoop for insects on the wing. She imagines their shrieking and twittering, though just audible presently is the "*kraa kraa*" of a crow. The perfume from the freesias on the small mantelpiece opposite the bed is clearly distinguishable amid the mild scent of cleaning agents and talcum powder. Peripherally breaking the spell, her son enters the room softly and sits beside the bed. He takes his mothers hand in his and tenderly strokes it.

In the ash trees bordering the cemetery and the adjoining paddock two pairs of crows are residing. On one substantial nest a female sits. She has the patient countenance that accompanies the nurturing instinct. For seventeen days she has attentively overseen the growth and development of her offspring still within their fragile speckled greenish blue shells. The male is elsewhere, most probably scavenging for food. Conversely, in the second nest there is much activity. This couple were later to pair, and now have to put the finishing touches to their nest. The male pokes at the larger twigs at the base of the structure, perhaps aware that he is becoming redundant in the construction task now

that the more refined finishing touches are required to furnish the interior which will accommodate their brood over the coming seven or eight weeks. The female drops down and lands on the rump of the white pony. She begins to pluck large beakfuls of hair to line the nest. The host appears unconcerned; at worst mildly affronted, but otherwise more interested in nuzzling the ground for fresh shoots of grass. Perhaps it is palliative to be rid of the excess matted fur as spring ensues.

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Before dawn Alice lingers in a place between waking and sleeping; a place where thoughts are vivid and intense. She is remembering. Her breath comes quickly but faintly and her eyelids flicker. She utters something urgent but unheard. Images are unfolding in Alice's mind, hallucinatory remnants of a different time.

A radiant heat warms her face, and now audible, the faint buzzing of insects nearby confirms it is summer. Alice reaches to touch the face of her sweetheart; the tiny beads of moisture on his forehead telling of recent exertion. He is breathing hard and his eyes are alight with a smile. They are tangled together where they fell, enfolded in her skirts and further entwined by a tangle of thin thread that joins them in an ardent union. Gently dragging against the skin of her bare arms she feels the serrated hairs of barley which was part flattened by their fall. Leading away from them the thin grey thread weaves and bobs among the upright ears as though floating in a golden sea, in and out of sight along the full length of the field.

They lie awhile listening as the pulse in their ears is replaced by the rustling and whispering of breeze through the cereal crop. Alice's senses are at once tingling and alert yet drowsy from the heat. Presently, he wrestles free of their embrace and rising to his feet, presses a wooden spool into her hand. She watches through her displaced hair as he lurches forward across the field, athletically following the course of the grey line. Reaching the boundary he retrieves the object of his desire and holds it aloft; a spectrum of vivid colour stretched taut with its red silk ribbons dragging and flapping.

He looks back towards her and waves. "You Ready?" he calls, then launches the kite which whips away from his grasp as though emancipated from an earthly captivity. Kneeling now among the swathes of her skirt fabric, Alice feels the friction of the spool as it spins in her fingers. The kite soars, tugging against her hands snaking upwards becoming ever smaller as it reaches new heights, making her eyes smart in an effort to follow its course against the bright backdrop of the sky.

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The once white pony stands towards the rear of the paddock breathing clouds of mist from its nostrils, its chestnut eyes half closed as a light drizzle descends.

Having clipped on her badge, Lisa draws back the curtains. It is barely light but the large tree at the foot of the garden is just visible, skeletal against a pink tinged sky. She makes her way downstairs when the phone rings in the hall. A little alarmed by a call at this hour, she answers with a hesitant "hello?". "Lisa, I hope I didn't wake you? I just wanted to catch you before you head for your early call. Your 6 o'clock – Alice? She passed away during the early hours..."

Daylight breaks...and so too does the speckled shell of a greenish blue egg, recently punctured from the inside. A tiny life is emerging on this cold spring morning, protected for now by the warmth of a fur lined sanctum.

Alongside the gate of the enclosure below, the once white pony stands motionless, its fur damp with dew.