

Imagine you've tried and failed to be a writer, and, your literary dreams up in smoke, you meet a nice man, and fall in love, and decide that if you aren't cut out to bring a unique work of art into the world, you might as well bring a unique human being into it.

Imagine you have a baby, and it's a girl, and the hearts of both you and your husband grow the mythical, cavernous new room that only parents ever enter, and as your daughter grows she is so wonderful, so kind and curious and funny, and she gets lost in books at the same young age you did, and at dinner parties she sits on your lap at the grown-ups' table and listens to the conversation with wide eyes after the other children have finished eating and gone off to play, and you watch in awe as she grows and deepens, becoming more complex and unknowable with each year.

Imagine one morning your daughter wakes up mute, and not just hoarse or frog-in-throaty, but truly, profoundly silent, and instead of taking her to school you and your husband drive her to the doctor, and when you get there the waiting room is filled with every member of your daughter's third grade class, and their parents all have the same worried look you and your husband have, and not one of the children can make a sound.

Imagine the doctor runs dozens of tests but can't find a single thing wrong with any of them, and the in-over-my-headness of her tone when she tells you all to go home for now makes the parents angry and scared, and the children, sensing this, begin to cry silently, and when on the drive home your daughter hands you a note that says, "What's going to happen, Mom?" all you can do is squeeze her little hand, and tell her you don't know, and call her honey, and keep your eyes on the road so she can't see the helplessness there.

Imagine the kids don't get better, and for a while none of the third graders is in school, but before long everyone starts to adjust, and your husband attaches some string to a notebook-sized whiteboard and hangs it around your daughter's neck, and gives her a dry erase marker to carry in her pocket, and soon all the children have whiteboards and markers, and they all go back to school, and just when things are getting back to relatively normal, these parrots show up out of nowhere and start to bond with the kids.

Imagine you go to pick up your daughter from school, and when she climbs into the car there is a royal blue bird on her shoulder about the size of a dove with a jade beak, and when you demand to know what is going on, she pops the cap off her marker and scribbles on her whiteboard that at recess a bunch of parrots landed on the playground and went straight to the kids in her class, and this one picked her, and the birds stayed with them all day no matter what the teachers did, and she named hers Ricky, and she holds up the words, "Please can I keep him?" and moments later erases them with a marker-stained sleeve and scrawls, "PLEASE," and the whole thing leaves you absolutely reeling, but the parrot makes a soft little hoot and bobs its head and climbs all over her

in a bid for attention, and she looks at it with such unrestrained affection, and strokes its head with one finger, and her face cracks into a soundless laugh when it coos a little and puffs its feathers, and her smile has been so rare lately that you decide to let her keep the bird, and you start the car without another word and head home.

Imagine one day you hear your daughter's voice for the first time in months, and you run to her bedroom with tears of relief in your eyes, so happy it is all over, and burst in ready to hug her and kiss her and hear her call you "Mom," but instead you find your daughter sitting cross-legged on the rug, mute as ever, staring in surprise at Ricky, who is quoting *The Catcher in the Rye* in what used to be her voice.

Imagine Ricky speaks more and more, always in your daughter's voice and always in literary quotations, and you wonder if the other parrots are the same, but when you ask your daughter what the parrots say at school she writes that they have to stay in their cages in the teachers lounge, and when you ask what they say at home she shrugs, and you watch her, bent over her homework at the kitchen table, Ricky nibbling her earlobe in a gentle, affectionate way, and when you ask if she misses being able to speak, he ruffles his feathers like he's annoyed at you for distracting her, and starts to quote Babel in your daughter's most exasperated voice.

Imagine one day you're washing dishes, and out the window you see black smoke rising through the rain from the direction of your daughter's school, and you run to the car and drive there as fast as you can, and when you arrive you see the school in flames and the children evacuated onto the lawn, each class in a meek alphabetical row except for the third grade, who are sobbing, their mouths wide in silent screams, barely restrained from running back into the burning school by the teachers, and as you near them your daughter breaks away and runs toward the building with a look of desperation that makes you sick, and you intercept her with a thud, crushing her to your chest, holding her against you with all your strength as rain crashes down around you and she writhes like an animal in pain.

Imagine behind you the parrots scream eloquently as they burn, trapped in their cages in the teachers' lounge, and their voices are full of terror and suffering, and on the lawn the third grade is mutely being traumatized as their birds scream in their own voices, the noise rising with the smoke in a terrible cacophony, and you wish you could press your hands over your daughter's ears to shield her from the screams, but you have to keep pinning her wretched little body to yours to keep her from wriggling away to follow them.

Imagine you hear a sound you have only heard in nightmares you find so deeply disturbing you cannot even speak them aloud to your husband, and now you know exactly how your daughter would sound if she were trapped and scared and hurt and dying beyond your reach, and you cry

onto her head as she fights against you so fiercely that you know at this moment, for the first time in her life, she truly sees you as her enemy.

Imagine as he burns Ricky shrieks in your daughter's voice, "and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea and the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets—" and is interrupted by another dying bird with another child's voice screaming, "as much a part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you from—" and another cuts in, "the orgiastic future that year by year recedes—" and your daughter's voice cuts again through the chaos with, "or shall I wear a red yes—" and is again cut off, "like black smoke, like a demented giant, and pull him apart nerve by nerve—" and voices pile on voices, getting louder, more fractured, until all that makes sense are bursts in the tumult: "start missing everybody," and "forge in the smithy of my soul," and "would I yes to say yes," and "the only immortality," and "borne back ceaselessly," and "Poo-tee-weet?"

Imagine the words fuse into an incomprehensible crescendo meaning only pain, pain, pain, and only when the voices of dying children become so loud it is like they are echoing inside your actual skull, and your arms and heart ache from restraining your daughter, and you find yourself praying to a god you do not believe in to let the parrots die, only then do they finally fall silent, and the third graders sound a collective moan, and crumple.

Imagine your daughter weeps loudly on the drive home as you intone apologies and try to forget that now you know exactly how her voice would sound if you crashed the car and it exploded in flames with her trapped inside, and when you pull into the driveway she runs straight to her room and throws herself into bed and will say nothing but "Go away!" in a voice that is hoarse and hollow, and when your husband comes home he finds you white and shaking at the kitchen table, and when you tell him what happened he looks as old and as helpless as you have ever seen him.

Imagine late that night, when your daughter has finally cried herself to sleep, your husband quietly removes Ricky's cage from her room, and the two of you stand in the doorway watching her sleep, like you did when she was a baby, and he twists his fingers into yours, and you lean your head against his shoulder with a sigh, and through the darkness your daughter, who is having a nightmare, murmurs nonsense in her sleep.