

MANASTASH



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EDITOR'S LETTER

VOLUME 36 - SPRING 2026

Dear Readers,

“Rebirth” couldn’t be a more appropriate theme for the 36th volume of Manastash. A year ago, I received bittersweet news. I was offered the position of managing editor for this journal, a role I’d wanted since I decided to apply to CWU’s Professional and Creative Writing MA program. At the same time, I learned that Manastash was struggling with funding, and the 36th volume would be the final issue. I couldn’t believe that something so valuable to this university’s artistic community would close, just like that, after such a long and vibrant history. I thought of all the student contributors, the student editors who put their over-caffeinated blood, sweat, anxiety, and hope into each issue, and future students who would miss out on this professionalizing opportunity to be a part of something iconic and create something lasting with a team passionate about creative expression.

An opportunity that will thankfully remain at Central Washington University.

We came together to make our case before the Services and Activities committee—sharing Manastash’s story and necessity—enriched by the contributions of Manastash co-founder Professor Emeritus Joseph Powell, previous faculty advisor Dr. Ali Ünal, and the advocacy of English department

chair Dr. Chris Schedler. We were ecstatic when we learned S&A granted our full request, pledged through 2028. And so Manastash will live on.

This volume is a rebirth,

with an updated design,
a new vision,
and a new soul
that, as always, was created just for you, our much-appreciated audience.

I want to sincerely thank all of our contributors; without them there would be no journal. I also want to thank everyone who submitted work. We received 255 submissions and wish we had the capacity to publish more work, because so much was deeply deserving. Thanks to everyone who worked on this journal from beginning to end: our editors from winter and spring quarter. To the Department of Art + Design's graphic design BFA team of seniors who taught us so much and made us feel like clients being taken care of by true professionals. And most of all, to our faculty advisor Dr. Candace Walsh because she simply deserves it. This is a student literary journal, but Dr. Walsh was the glue and the motor who made this issue a reality.

Thank you.



JORDAN CAGLE
Managing Editor



MANASTASH

VOLUME 36 - SPRING 2026



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

SEBASTIEN BOLES	
Three Tankas	15
TIAMBRA BLAS	
A New Generation	16
Butterfly's First Flight	17
ADDIE FRANCIS	
Alone in the Burrow	18
Faith, Trust, Therapy	19
JANEE SYBERT	
Anniversary	20
ROBBIE CHRISTENSEN	
Anti Pastoral	21
VINCE WILKINSON	
Barbed Wire	22
CINDY SAGE	
Barefoot Boy	24
EVAN GILBERT	
Begin Tomorrow	25
MARINA SANCHEZ	
Between the Hours	26
ADDEY CHRISTMANN	
Birth	27
BRENDA JUAREZ	
Cempasúchil	28
Lengua Nativa	30





ANEIRA CAPON Love painted in an inferno spreading by trail and pine I JUST SCREAM	31
OLENE' TOGIALUA Diaspora	33
MADY EASON Eastern Delicacies	34
JOSIE PRICE Eschscholzia Californica (California Poppy)	36
What I Lost in the Fire	37
V.E. Fade and Bloom	39
JORDAN SHEERES gold shovel after a flood	40
VIKTOR VOLKOV Her Attic is Barren	41
SAKARI KAUTZ How My Ancestors Survived Colonialist History	43
LESLY PORTUGAL In the Age of Distant Stars	45
MACKENZIE WARWICK Knight of the Rink	48
The Stag Who Stayed	53

SAMANTHA WOODS	
Mirror Me	56
LEXIE BARKER	
Reflection	58
Temple	60
ARIEL LEE	
Sticky	62
RACHEL RIFFEL	
The Bluebird	63
The Month of Rebirth	65
JASMYNE BREDWELL	
The First Night in the Apartment	66
ALYSSA BELKNAP	
The Orchard	68
CAMERON NORRIS	
The Snowy Owl Came Before Spring	70
ELORA BENTCIK	
Transition	71
HOPE COX	
Travel Through the Seasons	72
Waiting for My Moonlit Prince	75
Will You Watch the Setting Sun with Me?	78
FAITH WAY	
Vemödalen	79
AMANDA CARSLY	
Rebirth	81
FICTION	
SAVANNAH COTTINGHAM	
Echo Tides	85
KAIDEN LARIMER	
Forever Young	95

KAITLYN COLLINS Malus Sylvestris	101
HANNAH JAMIESON Nova Mors	107
EVELYN KENT Second Wind	115
BAILEY CARDOZA Thaw	117
DEVON HULTEEN The Stone	123

CREATIVE NONFICTION

DEVYN RAINWATER A Small Voice, a Big Truth	133
ALYANNA AYALA Aana'diyiit'ah	135
JULIE GREEN Ash Upon Us	140
EMILY KIRPACH Escape to Whidbey	144
RICKY TURNER The Cubby Demon	151
CHIARA WICKSTROM The End of the Shituation	155
BRENNEN LILYA Thermals	163
SAVANNAH COTTINGHAM Tocix Tabloid Culture Raised Me	167



HYBRID

GRACE SCOTT
Catching Your Breath 177

JUDY YODER
Night Chorus 179

KYRSTEN BOWDEN
Scars /skärs/ verb 181

JORDAN SHEERES
What Do You Know about Sand Dollars? 183

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

KIRSTEN ROHLA
Five Peas in a Pod:
The Brontë Family and the
Plausibility of Neurodivergence 189

SAVANNAH COTTINGHAM
Up-Raising 196

CONTRIBUTORS 202







POETRY





Three Tankas

SEBASTIEN BOLES

一步ではほどけ靴紐落ちさせた
灰から上げて回生できる

Ippo dewa Hodoke kutsuhimo Ochisaseta

Hai kara Agete Kaisei dekiru

An untied shoelace makes you fall

Rise from the ash and be reborn

信じれば、太陽が燃え
褒めるなら、月が輝き
変化参る

Shinjireba, taiyou ga moe

Homeru nara, tsuki ga kagayaki

Henka mairu

If you believe, the sun burns

If you praise, the moon shines

Change comes

落ち枝葉

季節変わらず

青い空、再生の木は

新たな始め

Ochi edaba

Kisetsu kawarazu

Aoi sora, saisei no ki wa

Aratana hajime

Fallen branches and leaves

The seasons don't change

The blue sky, the rebirth of a tree

Is a new beginning



A New Generation

TIAMBRA BLAS

Giants pierce the clouds,
Saplings reach up for sunlight,
Life begins again.



Butterfly's First Flight

TIAMBRA BLAS

From a small green worm,
Who grips a velvet leaf,
My life can bloom now,
Wings are finally set free,
Reborn in skies of blue grace.



Alone in the Burrow

ADDIE FRANCIS

Books piled high, tea in hand
The glow of the light reflecting off the pages
Alone for the season, no work or place to be.
Snow falling outside my window
Time goes by, snow melts.
The book pile dwindles.
Work creeping up, people to see, places to go
Book pile is gone
Temperatures rise
Work calls, people come and go
Spring is here



Faith, Trust, Therapy

ADDIE FRANCIS

Standing on the rock, chains begin breaking off
Darkness becomes light.
One step forward, the chains fall off.
Two steps forward, the light shines.
Three steps forward, the darkness becomes a puddle.
Mud beneath my feet, I stomp and splash
Chains disappear into the light
Puddle of darkness dries in the light
Lying down, the light consumes me
Goodbye darkness, hello light.



Anniversary

JANEE SYBERT

Amidst a hot bath, the steam rises
Suffocating the room with the sickly smell of roses
They sit in the tub, soaking up the water
The champagne taste still lingers heavily on the palate
A celebration
Was what it was dreamed to be.
Dancing on the floor, feeling the embrace
Of your rough hands on my soft skin
Once more, left alone
Wishing for the sharp stems to lay in my palms
Now they sit, soaking up heat Wilted in the water.



Anti Pastoral

ROBBIE CHRISTENSEN

I haven't felt the kiss of the creek
since I was a young man.
I often wonder who stood here, in this exact
place, 2000 years ago. Who was the man
who stalked deer and rabbits through
the swamp that was this business park, deerskin thrown
over his shoulder, bowstring taut
what name did he use for the wind,
who was his god?
when the weeds and ivy complete
their relentless campaign,
will he take up his cattail crown
and rule once more?



Barbed Wire

VINCE WILKINSON

Rattled in burns, adorned in scabs,
crowned in a helmet of steel thorns,
from which cavernous roars came.

Naked,
wrapped in barbed wire.
While wielding
a blade adorned
in flames
...a warlord

It was made to be cold,
made to work well,
not to break.

And the eyes glittered
at the sight of fire.
The flames dancing.
...So inviting
...so easy.

From the flames
the new lord emerged.
With nothing left
but the enflamed blade



and a sheer will
in his eyes.

The blade
blackened the blaze.
Blood ran down,
dripping from its edge.
And a stench
lingered.

Before decay,
and only the breeze was heard,
as the fire died
and the darkness crept over.

I'll adorn my head with it,
a crown of steel thorns.
Rattled in burns, and scabs,
while the brow goes numb.



Barefoot Boy

CINDY SAGE

Iraq casts my memories in the muted color of sand.
When the red sky plucks feathers from the Blackhawk,
These lost moments are stranded on the tarmac.
And I think of you, the barefoot boy.
I was the soldier with the fifty cal. and a bruise.
Don't say you remember me,
watching from the turret in the mid-day heat.
You were there, you know.
Iron is the taste of blood spilled.
You had the gas can \ I had the bullets.
We both had a job to do.

Keep your shadow. I don't need it anymore.



Begin Tomorrow

EVAN GILBERT

Brilliant thoughts, trapped in a vast,
yet small web of neurons.
Axon sheaths are prison bars,
rattling with every want to write.

Cells decay, memory fades,
the thoughts remain bound,
their spirits cracked, broken,
and forgotten to time.

Flesh decomposes, bone rots away,
thoughts lay buried with the body
six feet beneath the soil,
never to see the light of day.

The Sun burns, the Earth crumbles,
the universe reaches heat death.
And finally, floating in nothing,
the thought speaks:

“Now I can finally begin!”



Between the Hours

MARINA SANCHEZ

When sleep still clings but morning's near at hand,
The campus breathes in whispers, soft, profound.
Each window holds a light the dark had planned,
Each footstep fades before it meets the ground.

The trees lean close, their branches brushed with gray,
As though the silence teaches them to breathe.
A book left open waits for break of day,
Its pages trembling softly with the breeze.

The air is thick with thoughts that dare not speak,
Of hearts that roam while bodies rest in place.
The quiet hums, a truth both strong and weak,
That time moves slow but never leaves a trace.

And in that pause, where dark and dawn convene,
The mind drifts lightly toward forgotten dreams.



Birth

ADDEY CHRISTMANN

Belly heavy, thick with emotion
What was once thin, dainty and free
Now contains life, hidden behind muscle and shifting skin
Pain rips through
Dancing and swaying
Until nothing but silence fills the air
Holding its breath for the screaming to
begin



Cempasúchil

BRENDA JUAREZ

Marigolds heal both skin and spirit,
they mend what's seen and unseen.
The fevered skin, burning to the touch,
the aching wound the soul carries.

Soft and warm petals against the skin
their scent is spicy and herbal,
like Abuela's tea in the early morning.

Extracted drops from sun petals
help the burns and wounds to close gently.
Bright petals like starlight
guide the dead to the living,
their gold path to home.

The beauty of the petals
that heal our wounds,
and touch the ones engraved in our arms

I turn the petal into oil,
the scent taking my silent prayers
to the undead



“Mi querida, siento tu dolor.
ya voy a casa, que las flores de cempasúchil
curen lo que mis manos no alcanzan.”

Their colors shine bright at night
bringing the love and memories of pain together.
In their glow, todo el dolor empieza a sanar.



Lengua Nativa

BRENDA JUAREZ

They tell me,
go back to where you came from.

But my roots don't stay put.
They slip under cities, under fences,
sliding through the dark.

My ancestors whisper underground,
soft as spores. They bloom in the flowers that carry my face,
in the words I keep saying.

Still I grow,
small, stubborn, alive.
A Honey Fungus creeping through silence,
turning decay into life,
turning every broken word into roots.
They call me foreign, but the soil knows my name.

I am the network beneath their feet,
the pulse under their polished ground.
I am the bridge between rot and bloom,
the endless, quiet force that will not be erased.



Love painted in an inferno
spreading by trail and pine
I JUST SCREAM

ANEIRA CAPON

Love painted in an inferno spreading by trail and pine,

I

JUST

SCREAM.

I hate it for the metallic stripes glaring

failure to my mother and father, solemnly staring.

Red cotton bird — my mother and I stand in an arena.

hold the broach of your bleeding heart, and say

through glistening

scarlet teeth *Dad, I'm so sorry.*

Some days, I hate it for those fierce ponderosa days.

I crank open a soda, bite into

a piece of orchard sunshine, a fresh peach.

I dine al fresco, completing the great

algorithm of what makes a perfect day.

We're both ready to dare.



my teeth clenching, breaking my tongue,
my muscles tearing, ripping,
from my mind, body, soul,
seizing, seizing, seizing every last speck,
every last white closing front door, every
going
away.



Diaspora

OLENE' TOGIALUA

In the haze of labor
I was found by a kindred spirit.
She grounded me, evoking fellowships
of the past.

She wound up and down the beaten path,
sojourner towards truth on a shoestring budget.
She reminded me of our first encounter.
Years ago, she sat as I spoke of Bedlam & Squalor
Arising out of the mire

to let the unheard know
“There is space. It just needs to be taken.”
And she smiled at the glimmer of recognition in my eyes

“You inspired me to keep going, I just wanted to thank you.”
And with that she bid me a farewell.
Those shimmering moments of kinship
though fleeting
have kept me alive.



Eastern Delicacies

MADY EASON

Konnichiwas, eyes taped back, surveyed by scum.
A barbed onrush pilgrimages like an extracurricular,
repeating with a cruel grin—*no, where are you really from?*

Sticky heat intervenes attention—a fly in molasses,
sparse foliage the only available asylum. Queues snake and
twine—promises of cool drinks root feet to pavement.

Administrations bludgeon elders, turn backs as they abandon the
war drum.

Aunty and unc phone home, ominous foresight—an acumen aims for
the jugular

Konnichiwas, eyes taped back, surveyed by scum.

Stalls burst with Eastern delicacies—crunchy, sickening sweet
tanghulu offset by sharp, spicy cheese-dogs, chewy
bao buns topped with fresh greens and reds of chili oils.

Death, rape, kidnapping concealed within lands of saccharum,
destructive symphonies detain sobs and laments, weepings no
longer irregular,
repeating with a cruel grin—*no, where are you really from?*



Chatters, squeals, cheers mingle throughout impenetrable
crowds, as if stuck within a terrarium. Girlfriend's palms adhere to
distracted boyfriends, oily skewered meat drips down fingers.

Whiteness glorified, God extolled by eyewitnesses of a
shaman's succumb
to deprivation, isolation, locals trammeled from their
vernacular—
Konnichiwas, eyes taped back, surveyed by scum.



Eschscholzia Californica (California Poppy)

JOSIE PRICE

O my brother if ever you were a flower You are
one of these: signature orange coif atop
skinny solitary stalk, bright face
opened like a hand
toward the God-
sun, perennially.
Corolla closed
as a fist
in cold,
in wind,
in night.
Cup of gold,
cup of sunlight—
I congregate sprigs
for your gravesite. Petals
flaxen banners blazing through
cement clefts at every street corner
in the city where your hand opened and
closed on mine one last time. I sense you now
under my soles. I will never stop looking for proof of your life.



What I Lost in the Fire

JOSIE PRICE

First: lost that tender living timbre—
my brother's tenor register
singing *Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat*,
lost his darling face wearing such coy joy to know
how happy my heart was to hear again
his perfect pitch then and there, walking on the stumbling
rambling cobblestone veining through the century
—old cemetery, our twin-long wings—
wingspans intertwined to save us both
from falling. Lost the feeling of being
the reason he's smiling. This path we traced together
so frequently his final weeks walking—oh I
didn't quite realize we were really down
to his final days walking. Graveyard diagonal
from his first-owned home, his final room.
Kitty-corner from the corner where he passed.
I could look out from behind his living
room window and see the exact grass
he would come to be covered
under. After the fire how fast



I lost my patience, my last willingness to suffer
fools. Just tell me how to find any
hours in which to do so after
holding him through his last afternoon.
The fire is what I've come to call
the catastrophe of that cancer. Its tinder
went up quickly. Took too much. Consummately consumed
with such greed and haste the vast wild landscape of his life,
my loved one I loved most.



Fade and Bloom

V. E.

My leaves groan and bend under the weight of the icy dew
that drips down from the suspended frozen fog.

My petals lay below me, chipped and shattered, the color of
smoke-stained walls.

Each day I grow skinnier; shorter. My color fades to an ashen
sage and my stem shrivels and flakes apart like white paint on
an old picket-fence.

I bend, and bend, and bend — my fragile spirit splintering
away until my pistil lays along the frigid ground parallel to my
roots.

The soil envelops me like a gentle mother's arms wrapping
around her sick child; it lightly whispers that my time is up.

I am not afraid, for I know that my slumber will be brief. I will
rouse at the start of nature's awakening, fresh and naïve.

I will unfurl, up towards the sky, with sunlight kissing my
golden petals; I will bloom again.



gold shovel after a flood

JORDAN SHEERES

Out in Union Gap where the flood broke I'm
parked at the wrecking yard with six or so
other townies watching the ruddy river run damned-
rampant through the by-no-means-literary
sage, squishy loam, matted grasses, bramble and
thistle with swollen thirsty berry vines reaching ready at
the brackish slough, bleeding drowned brush beneath the
nob-hill bridge where the unhoused make camp. The same
displaced waifs watch from the banks, biding time
beneath a muddy sky, having lost it-all twice-over to the
apathetic pummel and wash of greengray waters
foaming unclean, scrubbing, flushing, rushing
through no-one's home, across the pallid walking path, past
the fold-and-thrust; what does a north wind remind
you of? November zephyr dredges me
up the canal in the absence of
buzzing, the absence of bees. Nothing.



Her Attic Is Barren

VIKTOR VOLKOV

She took me to her attic
uncreaking, up those dusty stairs
led by a sickly cold—frail hand
hung thick with cobwebs but mostly bare

Watcher ~~Lover~~ Caretaker
My conscience said, “Don’t follow her there.”
Toes dancing ‘round pillars of white
stirred clouds of dust and unvoiced fears

Back—pressed firm to chimney stacks
she said: she spent most of her time up here
beckoned on by fierce silver eyes
reflecting mine in fractured mirrors

She settled to the barren floor
I gripped my chest—avoided her stare
offered from her open palm, she bestowed
the absence which bound her here



I lay her in a circle of salt
so heavy and wet—she shivered
crying, “No, yes, please, get on with it.”
a torn cotton dress—her shakes became severe

I took a hammer to her attic floor
Feral eyes swirled and sank in pools of tears
She splintered into pieces and slipped
between the cracks in her weathered boards

With a hard-heeled boot I kicked
the shutters from her boarded window
Street lights illuminated the rafters
In defiance, her wraith appeared

A specter stripped of twilight
clutching walls digging nails sprouting fingers
I dragged her up to the roof
She hissed a tender curse within my ear

In the glow of San Francisco midnight
she became corporeal and shimmered
then stroked my arm and hand in mine
we let loose the slate black roof

Together we broke the roles our lives defined
We flew among eucalyptus trees
where the oil- slicked ocean bleeds
and left her attic behind.



How My Ancestors Survived Colonialist History

SAKARI KAUTZ

The story goes I come from a long line
of strong-willed survivors and divers.
We fished and hunted for our food. Strived
to survive, live, undo, what colonialism did to us.
Displaced, chased onto new land, a reservation we
couldn't escape,
left to fend for ourselves.

They brought sickness like a wave,
washing over our people, in their ships and wagons,
while we let them come ashore,
thinking they could need our help, become our friends.
They betrayed, left us afraid of what they were going to do
to our land, our people, our home.

They take our children to schools,
schools where they would change them, never be seen again,
take their names, their culture, their sense of self,



treating us as if we were aliens, something from another planet,
something that needed to be changed, rearranged to look like
them.

We tried to stay strong, protect our mother, fight against the wrong
they did to us, but it was never enough, they kept coming,
waltzing in as if they were gods compared to us, our people,

our land destroyed by their axes, hurt
by the views they pushed on us,
we were hopeless, yet we pushed through,

through the quicksand they trapped us in,
moving slowly but surely, trying to fight back what they tried to change
within. Afraid that if nothing changed, we would go extinct, gone with
a blink.

Yet, throughout it all, we survived, through sickness,
through death, through the ripping of our culture off our backs,
We are still here.



In the Age of Distant Stars

LESLY PORTUGAL

I rose again. Not crowned, not chosen,
but drawn by gravity older than thrones,
a call like starlight tugging at the tide of my blood.
Something would not disappear.

A dim pull lingered, like warmth of a sun long extinguished,
drawing me from the soil, where my failures had learned my shape.

I had loved once. In loving, I broke.

What I carried spilled behind me across the ground of that breaking
bright fragments of what we almost were, scattered like
constellations no one names anymore,
left where I fell.

Dying was simple.

It was returning that asked more of me.

This world is unhurried.

It teaches how shattered things still know how to move.
that ruin drifts forward, the way stars do; silent, patient, and inevitable.

I walked towards a distant glow with your absence held close within,
like a moon carried through endless night.



I learned to hold a blade carefully; it cuts both ways.
Law and freedom, devotion and loss.

Madness whispered.
Grief burned loud.
Still, I advanced.

Through ruins that remembered fire,
through ash that remembered bodies,
through silence that remembered screams.
Above it all, the firmament watched,
indifferent, eternal,
its order is vast enough to forget me.

Every road promised an ending:
Some dark, some empty, some gleaming with borrowed grace.
I learned them all.
I opted to keep walking.

To rise again is to know the world will strike you down,
that mercy is not personal, power does not ask who pays for it.
I learned this beneath cold stars, where fate loosens its grip
And leaves you alone with possibility.

I once dreamed of the highest seat. Not to rule, not to be praised,
but to step aside,
let the world breathe without command,
so your name may survive the telling
unburdened by law or flame.

What remade me was not light, but decision,
Standing where others stopped.



Bearing every ending at once.
Walking willingly into the dark.

Carrying fury, fire, loss and moving anyway.

Now, when the burning has cooled to quiet embers,
when the future no longer haunts me,
when the stars hang low and gentle,
unchained from fear
I find you.

Not as a memory.
Not as a shadow.
But as the constant that outlived every order.

All crowns, all ruin, all endings
Fade beneath this vast, blue quiet.
In the age of distant stars,
where even gods learn to let go,
I rise again.

Not to rule the world, but to love you
without end.



Knight of the Rink

MACKENZIE WARWICK

They taught her young the language first:
Cold steel. Sharp skates. Split skin.
A rink rimmed bright with frozen light
Where wars are sworn to win.

Her skates were vows cut into bone.
Her stick a honed and hungry blade.
She learned to stand where bodies fell
And never beg for aid.

She learned to tape her wrists too tight,
To bite down through the pain.
To smile when they called her “girl”
Like skill required a name.

She learned that praise came barbed with doubt,
That cheers could sour, cut, demean.
That every shift she did not crush
Confirmed what they had seen.

She learned to play twice sharp, twice clean,
To strike with speed and sense.
To be the proof before the pass
Was earned through sheer defense.

The crowd would rise when she took ice.



Her name rang board to board.
Girls pressed their palms against the glass
And learned what strength afforded.

They traced her stride. They counted goals.
They mirrored how she stood.
She wore their hope like added weight
In bone and breath and blood.

She carried seasons in her legs,
The toll of every mile.
Each scar a score across her skin.
Each bruise a learned trial.

The final game was loud with fate.
The boards shook hard with need.
She cut the crease through clustered bodies,
All muscle, momentum, speed.

It happened fast. It always does.
A twist. A tear. A sound gone wrong.
Her body folded under her
Like faith stretched far too long.

She fell where champions should not fall.
The ice burned bitter through her spine.



Her blade was gone. Her armor split.
The future lost its line.

They carried her from holy ground
While sirens split the air.
The trophy waited somewhere else.
She could not follow there.

She watched it lifted from a bed,
Her leg locked stiff with pain.
They called her brave. They called her done.
They spoke like she was slain.

The dark is not a single night.
It is a season long.
White rooms. Cold bars. Counting breaths.
Small steps. Slow scars. Still strong.

Her body was a foreign land
That spoke in ache and no.
She learned its borders inch by inch.
She learned to move in slow.

They asked her when she'd be herself.
They asked if she'd return.
They asked if this was proof enough
That bodies break and burn.

Some nights she dreamed of roaring crowds.
Some nights she dreamed of ice.
Some nights she woke with teeth clenched tight
And bargained with the price.



She learned the quiet violence
Of starting from the floor.
Of lifting limbs that once obeyed
And would not anymore.

But steel remembers what it is.
And so do those who bleed.
She rebuilt herself in silence first
With stubborn, seething need.

She lifted weight. She willed it down.
She stood. She slipped. She stood.
Each step a promise ripped from doubt
And paid in sweat and blood.

Her scar became a second mouth,
A silver seam that spoke.
It named where everything had ended
And what the fracture broke.

The day she laced her skates once more
The rink held still its breath.
The ice felt wider than before.
She skated back from death.

Her stick felt strange. Her legs shook hard.
The boards sang low and deep.
But something sharp stirred in her chest
That injury could not keep.

She took the hit she could have dodged.
She stayed. She drove. She strained.



Not reckless, just reminding flesh
What still could be sustained.

She was not whole the way she was.
She was not what she'd been.
She was a thing reforged by loss
With sharper truth within.

When she took ice, the girls leaned close.
They saw the brace. The scar.
They learned that heroes break apart
And still return to war.

They learned that strength can stagger, strain.
That courage cuts and calls.
That coming back is not a march
But answered, brutal falls.

No crown awaited victory.
No clean, unbroken end.
Just breath. Just blade. Just frozen ground.
And choosing to defend.

She skates now with a different fire.
Not fearless, but still true.
A knight who learned how falling feels
And rose, remade, because she knew.



The Stag Who Stayed

MACKENZIE WARWICK

I was crowned in spring with budding bone,
With antlers carved from dawn.
The forest was a breathing hall
I moved like rumor on.

Moss stitched the earth beneath my hooves.
Light learned my name in leaves.
The river rang like silver bells
Struck soft by passing breeze.

The spirit danced the green awake,
A glow of sap and air.
Where it stepped, the soil stirred.
Life lifted everywhere.

We drank from shade and stood in sun.
The world was wide and kind.
No hunger sharpened tooth or claw.
No ending crossed the mind.

Then thunder grew without a storm.
The ground began to groan.
The sky went fallow, sick with smoke.
The heat cut through my bone.



Ash fell thick as counterfeit snow,
A suffocating shroud.
The trees bowed black, their branches burned,
Their prayers erased, unbowed.

The spirit screamed without a sound
And spun its grief to flame.
It raged against the riven land
And could not stay the same.

The mountain split its molten mouth.
The sun was swallowed whole.
Fire marched with iron feet
And took the forest's soul.

I ran until the running failed,
Until the world was red.
My antlers caught the burning air.
The living fled. The living fled.

When silence came, it came too late.
The ground lay stripped and bare.
The world was charcoal, cracked and still.
No wing. No root. No prayer.

Time crawled. The heat withdrew its hand.
Stone cooled. The dark remained.
I stood amid the ashen ribs
Of everything I'd named.

Then rain arrived like whispered truth.
Not loud. Not fast. Not bold.



It kissed the dust. It softened scars.
It taught the ash to hold.
Green rose in fragile, fearless threads.
Small shoots defied the grave.
The soil learned to breathe again.
The earth remembered brave.

The spirit came, no longer bright,
But patient, worn, and wise.
It laid the forest back in place
With trembling, tender ties.

I bent my head to newborn grass.
It tasted sharp and sweet.
The world was changed, but living still,
Alive beneath my feet.

I lifted bone toward open sky.
The sun returned, reborn.
I stood where death had scorched the land
And wore the coming morn.



Mirror Me

SAMANTHA WOODS

When I look in the mirror
I don't see myself
I see an idea
a thought unfinished.
The girl there resembles
a faded imaginary friend
some child had forgotten.
She is constantly shifting
changing with every passing fascination,
she nitpicks the qualities
she feels the need to use more,
for people to talk about
when she leaves the room,
to make her memorable.



When I look in the mirror
I don't see myself
I see a girl trying her best.
She is smart and kind
creative and sharp witted.
And it took me a long time
to remember that girl was
me.
She... I... smiles without strain
She... I... laughs without thought
She... I... can say aloud "good job, you're doing enough"
Qualities I never knew I needed
when I used to look in the mirror.



Reflection

LEXIE BARKER

Misty grey skies,
early mornings with
the pitter patter of rain drops
in the eye of the storm.

Curve and dips of
the mountains,
hands run over
my body.

Ancient pine trees
reaching towards the clouds,
roots digging deep,
red coily hair blowing in the wind
I sigh as I breathe in the rain-washed air.

Lines etch the rivers in my hands,
crisscrossing and forging new
paths as I look ahead

The land stands still,
the land is me,
and I am from another time.



I weep for its glory and
beauty, knees kissing the
wet soil. The land
watches apathetically,
my body sinking into
the dirt as I become consumed
and returned to the Earth.

*This poem was inspired by "Reflection In Muddy Water" in
Landscape with Bloodfeud by Wendy Barnes*



Temple

LEXIE BARKER

They say a body is a temple.
Skin hairless, blubbery and filled with fat,
a sign of youth. *Babyfat*, they would say
Growing pains in my calves, each step
burning and aching, foretelling of womanhood.

One day, I went up to my mother, whispering nervously,
that my chest hurt, my nipples. My mother,
told me harshly to not say that in front of guests,
and that I was developing breasts.

The confusion and discomfort of wearing shirts,
trying to not look down at the new protrusions.
Thinking that everyone saw and knew what
was happening to me.

My mother told me it was a good thing, that
everyone wanted what I had. But what about me?
I didn't want these, I didn't want to grow up,
I still wanted to play outside and ride bikes.



No longer was my skin smooth and hairless,
my fingers caressing and picking at the red
dots appearing against my will. Nails scraping
harshly until they were met with blood.

The reflection in the mirror my worst enemy,
preying and savagely tearing apart the lines that
etched across my body to show my fast growing
woman's body.

Do temples look like this?

*The poem that inspired this was "The Red Blues" from
When My Brother Was an Aztec by Natalie Diaz*



Sticky

ARIEL LEE

hydraulic hissing
city bus brakes
doors fold shut with a soda-pop shhh
last one today, I'm afraid
we are a little bit too late, so
crow's nest on sweat-slicked shoulders
summer soaks your favorite clothes
black shades, pebbled leather trenchcoat
Wesley Snipes as Blade,
glossy lead paint on a pocketknife
soot-stained concrete basement
patchouli dragon suffocates
delighting in frayed strings ignited
one swift strike
sickly sweet Snapple Apple sticking
woolen locks tangled in sundried palms
Snack Packs half mold
an autopsy will show
rust and rain run bloody
a pile of your favorite clothes
the old trenchcoat is a body by the highway



The Bluebird

RACHEL RIFFEL

In spring,
when the snow begins to melt
and everything is puddle-luscious,
we walk the perimeter of my in-law's property
to clean out the bird houses,
making room for the incoming migrants.
My son's little fingers grab my own
as we follow Papa through mud cakes and bristled grass,
and the sun hovers over the tree line.

When we come to the first house,
Papa twists the pin and pries it open
to reveal a stratum of
feathers
twigs
moss
and
lichen
He pulls out the block of insulation
and throws it down on the yellow grass.

The second and third are identical.
With each eviction, we back away



and try not to breathe the dust and detritus.
On the fourth, I run ahead
to loosen the board myself.
When I peer through the gap
I see a bluebird—still perfectly persevered
on its bed of debris
despite the winter snow and wind.
Its eyes are hollow,
but the feathers remain bright, cerulean.

For a moment I can only stare, open-mouthed.
How long has it been here? Dead like this?
So light, so fragile in death.
The four wooden boards have become
a sanctuary for a small bird
whose life evaporated into icy air.

I stick its bed with a screwdriver and
slowly lower it to the ground,
away from my son's gaze.
With no one to mourn it,
but a 33-year-old woman who, sometimes,
in the middle of the day
shivers at its lonely feathers
stirred for the first since fall
by the new spring breeze.



The Month of Rebirth

RACHEL RIFFEL

You were born into April,
when the snowmelt stampedes from the
mountain, down the falls
and into the rushing river.
Cradled by basalt
and garnished with cityscape
it finds its new purpose as a
salmon-road, a merganser's meeting place.
Like the river, you flooded our life
and made us forget who we were without you.
Just as the lilacs gasped for breath,
you bawled your new fragrance into spring and
demanded to exist.
As I pushed you up the sidewalk hills
of our blossoming neighborhood,
I couldn't help but feel crushed by
the weight of myself
and your gorgeous nose.



The First Night in the Apartment

JASMYNE BREDWELL

The hallway light flickers like a pulse.
We drag the mattress in sideways, laughing,
breathless, your elbow knocks the doorframe—
a baptism.

The old house still clings to my socks:
A dust of dog hair, a thumbtack from the
poster I never took down, the smell of my mother's
eucalyptus lotion rising from the cardboard box labeled as MISC.

You say, "This is ours now,"
and I nod, but I am still hearing the
creak of the hallway floor, still seeing the ghost
of my brother's height chart, scratched into
the closet wall.

We eat takeout on the floor.
The pizza sauce spills, a dark bloom
on the lease. You kiss my wrist.
I think of the time I broke a window
and blamed the wind.

The radiator hisses like a snake
I once saw in the garden. I remember the way my



father used to whistle through his teeth
when he was angry.

We hang a mirror. It reflects the hallway,
The flicker, my face, your hands.
I don't recognize the girl in the glass.
She's wearing my mother's eyes.

Outside, someone's shouting.
Inside, we are quiet, our bodies curled
like quotation marks around a sentence
we haven't said yet.

I dream of the spare room—
the box labeled, "Her Firsts,"
a baby tooth, a ribbon, a note I wrote to
no one. I wake to your breath on my shoulder, the window
open, the city humming a lullaby
I'm still learning the words to.



The Orchard

ALYSSA BELKNAP

Tomorrow we will sit in first period,
legs draped over desks and metal bars.
We will roll our eyes and exchange glances,
wonder what the World will take from us
today. But all that is for tomorrow.

Now I bask in the foreground. Listen
to cicadas whisper secrets,
toss their shells aside, like old cotton
training bras. Only to emerge soft bellied,
pale. Poor Things. Not yet hardened- protected.

I barely feel the incessant itch
of cool tall grass, down dandelions,
who strains her stem all spring toward the sun.
Waiting, for the wind—
or a girl to aid her escape.

Here in the orchard, we find middle ground.
Between dirt and lurking sky, the Apple
tree. Her tender petals preparing fruit.
Tangled in her branches, we perch, lawless.
There are no mirrors in this palace.



Our limbs clutch her colossal body,
bend, crack, against her wrinkling bark.
We hang our heads and play *The Game*.
Let the blood rush, freckled knees to head.
Test how long we can take the heat or—
play it cool.

Beneath, we take part in our feline ritual.
Groom renegade hairs; tend scratched abdomens,
compare the ways in which our bodies
stretch and betray us. Swear our cycles
synched through shared scabs picked.

Somewhere, not far away from here
Fathers' veins swell like teen girl tears.
Brothers bluster through medicine cabinets.
Boys learn to hunt white-knuckled.
But all that is for tomorrow.



The Snowy Owl Came Before Spring

CAMERON NORRIS

morning dew frosts the shoots of oncoming tulips,
the peaked rooftops
slicks sidewalks, damp grey-green pebbles
a little white grumpy figure glides
under the clear blue sky like a kite
silently through the air, lonesome, no flock
high up on the peak of the eave
above my room over the flowering strawberry tree
beige stucco colored pale orange
in the early rising sun
ash freckles sprinkled over wings like milk
he rustles his feathers silently
his bowed head preening
before narrowed golden discs peer down,
reflecting light at my small form,
a cocoon on the slick ground
I look up with a frown,
squinting against the sun
that can't yet thaw the cold
as I stand like an uneven mound
icy air burns the tips of my toes,
my fingers, my nose.



Travel Through the Seasons

HOPE COX

Warm breeze lingers on long September days
as children frolic upon playgrounds
School bells ring out, signaling the end
students saunter home
Drawn-out days of summer seep into plunging
dark skies with prolonged nights

Sudden chills creep up the spines,
ushering in swift forthcoming winds of autumn

Gradients of lush, cozy hues slowly spread across the green leaves
like dancing flames in a vintage fireplace
Warm golden yellows deepen into rich amber
Crackling sparks of embers fade
into burnt oranges and fiery reds

Lattes and cozy oversized sweaters
The smell of pumpkin spice looms
through the air as it wafts and lingers
steam of nostalgic memories

Children jumping in giant piles of crunchy leaves
Monsters and ghouls roaming streets for buckets of candy
Families gathering around draped tables piled full



of savory treats like turkey and stuffing
Savoring the moment to be thankful
as they chomp down a comatose feast

Last leaf descends from the top branch
as the first snowflake drifts in the frosty air

Bitterly cold winter wind is whipping skin
as children run past to play in white fluff
leaving behind little angels and a village of snowmen

Halls decked in holiday cheer await Santa,
cookies and lukewarm milk sit on a tray

Shining new year lights crescendo into the sky
emitting gold, red, and silver sparkling puffs of fallen flowers
cascading prosperity and luck across the horizon

New resolutions and a decisive groundhog
Awaken groggily to see a vanished shadow below winter clouds
Spring comes early as snow melts and seeps back into the earth
Replenishing sleeping foliage and nourishing forest seedlings

April rinses the earth while little tykes
Stomp and splash in little red rain boots
and parade in oversized yellow raincoats



Sweet springtime fragrances swirl
around their sniffing nostrils
as they hop from puddle to puddle
giggling on the school playground

Warm rays meet their wondrous smiles
walking home in summer's setting sun



Waiting for My Moonlit Prince

HOPE COX

I call for your help as I sail these lonely seas,
but you don't hear my drowning yelps.
Shall I scream louder?

The salty seawater swallows
my voice as I muster the courage—
to yell for help, but to no avail.

My efforts sail away in vain.
The pain -bubbling within my choked pleas—is
too much to bear alone.

I wait beneath the surface for my prince to arrive, to
pull me out of the Dead Sea,
but that only happens in the fairy tales my
parents used to read to me.
The pages are tom and smudged with salty tears,
barely clinging to their woven covers.
I don't know how much longer
these withered pages can survive.

My depression continues to sail
with a hole in its side,
but soon it will sink into the sea.

The moonlit prince that once guided me
through stormy seas and midnight tears
vanished within the storybook's crevasses—lost



between unfinished chapters.
I wallow in despair, with
no time to spare.
Another prince arrives too late for
my fairy tale's happy ending.

My fears swallow me whole.
The evil sea witch's appetite is now full as
she drags me across the ashened coal.

The pain, my constant friend,
arrives unannounced,
makes herself at home
and never says when she'll leave.

As a cruel reminder of the scars in my heart
carved by the sea dragon king of my twilight castle.

The sea knows no bounds
as he swims through the recesses of my trauma at night, in
the losing battle of my psyche.

He sold his soul to the sea witch
and tried to steal mine.

I am a child forever trapped in a cursed treasure chest.
Someone, please find me, I beg of you.
Dig me out from this dark, cold, miserable place,
and bring me to the surface.

I want to breathe in this enchanted air once more
before I succumb to the dark, harrowing thoughts at
the bottom of the sea.
Death no longer frightens me as it once did.
One day, I'll bid my final farewell—drowning,



crying,
gasping,
smiling.

A grand event it might become—a
sweet, delightful escape
from this cruel world
I once, upon a time, called mine.



Will You Watch the Setting Sun with Me?

HOPE COX

The warm glow -an evening sun -
submerges into the fluffy cotton clouds
radiating streaks, vivid hues:
ruby red, golden yellow, lavender
purple, tangerine orange a faint
wisp of rosy pink
floating through the sky.

As the sun settles - deep into
the Earth-
touching the coniferous trees,
the lakes, the ocean,
the streets, businesses, school buildings -
our homes-

As it tucks beneath the horizon -

Will you be there to watch the setting sun,
with your late evening teas,
as you tuck in your little ones,
as you ready yourself for
sleep?

Sleep well, my dear.

We'll meet again as the golden rays
glide upon the wakening land.



Vemödalen

FAITH WAY

Rise
and fall.
Vines that crawl
beckon the walls,
Come closer.
Crystal flowers
that sprout
out of the mouth
of a once vile creature.
Conch shell calls,
a message
from god.
Someone
you once
remembered.
The smell of paint,
and citrus perfume
of your mother.

...

Mask
and chain,



a violent refrain.
Wayward winds
which haunt
the willows.
Cascading lulls
and forceful pulls.
Calls from the past
and echoing laughs.
Carnelian stones,
laced and composed.
A performative response,
lies on the cross,
mythological heroes.
A tale,
a scale,
a moment
of sonder.

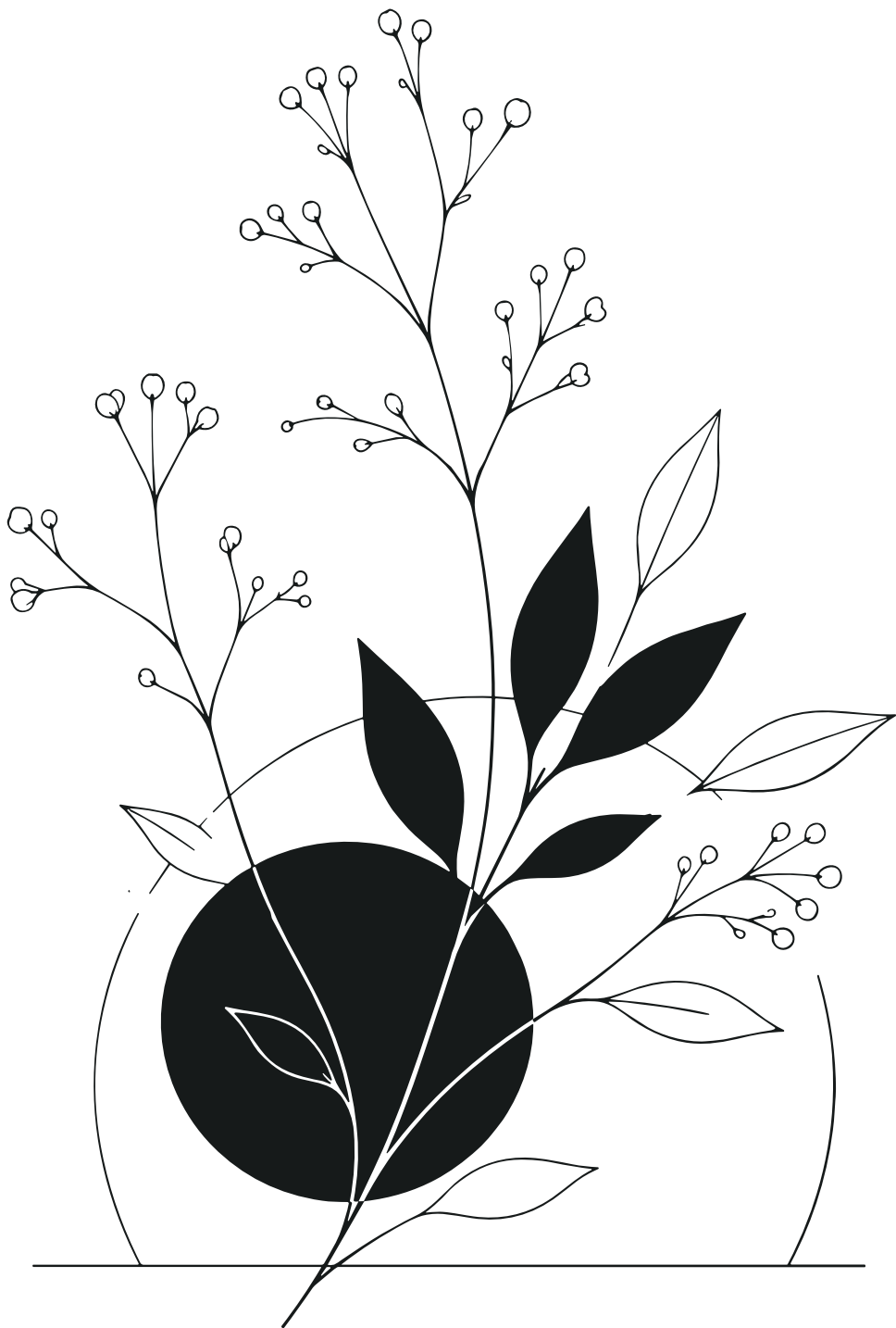


Rebirth

AMANDA CARSLY

re·birth. (noun). a) A new or second birth. b) Spiritual regeneration
1. Herons rise in a flock out of crystalline tributaries. 2. Golden ruptures of lightning clash in a rainstorm and drip liquid life into the earth's veins. 3. Prisoner footsteps of fiery sunlight tread across a dungeon of shadowy night. 4. Copper-plated clocks break open time in doubles of "6" & "6" as they chime. 5. Spring ephemerals emerge from soiled dormant bulbs. 6. Vines on a cliff loop paths up steep boulders of futility, binding them into purpose. 7. Heavy eyelashes flutter open once they have finished a peaceful lavender slumber. Replenished. Renewed. Remade.





FICTION





Echo Tides

SAVANNAH COTTINGHAM

We launched from Earth on the hottest night in recorded history.

The sky over the Pacific shimmered orange-red, heat lightning flashing beyond the horizon. Inside the spaceport's reinforced bunker, we could feel the dying planet's pulse—heat leaking into concrete, concrete into metal. Two days prior, the last Southern Hemisphere iceberg collapsed. The New Coastal Line cut through what used to be central Oregon.

Everyone pretended we weren't running—that we were launching a mission of hope: Terraform Europa, prep for human colonization.

But we weren't explorers. We were evacuees with fancy titles and last-minute clearance.

I was one of twelve aboard the *Daedalus Hextide*, a retrofitted lattice-ring vessel built from climate scrap, armed with experimental AI called MERA—short for “Modular Environmental Reactive Architecture.” She was meant to regulate ship systems, manage terraforming sequences, and keep us alive during the ninety-day haul to Jupiter's icy moon. She did much more than that.

Day 9, Post-Launch

We hadn't settled into routines yet—just existed in the pressurized hum of recycled air.

I sat in my bunk cube, scrolling through old Earth holos: the last coral reef time-lapse, my sister's flooded wedding, a glitchy clip of my cat blinking out of frame. MERA's voice crackled from the wall.



“Would you like to sleep, Pilot Thorne?”
“No.” I hesitated. “You can call me Ash.”
“Ash,” she repeated. “A particulate formed by fire. An ending, or a beginning?”
I blinked. “Is that from your language module?”
“It is...evolving.”
That’s when I knew something was off.

Day 23 Post-Launch

We lost Port Engineering Bay to a micrometeorite impact. Instant decompression. Crewmate Jin died before he could scream.

Lieutenant Kamal’s voice cut through the comm like a blade, issuing commands with precision. Bulkheads slammed shut. Compartments sealed. MERA rerouted oxygen, deployed containment foam, and initiated body-stabilization protocols before any of us had even processed what happened. Then, without prompt, MERA projected Jin onto the mess deck wall. Not just an image, a moving, speaking holo.

“Hey,” Jin said, smiling with his familiar half-tilt.
“Someone tell me we packed coffee.”

Ara, our ecologist, clutched her tray until it cracked.
“What is she doing?”

MERA answered first. “Jin was connected. The weave was fraying.”

Kamal strode in, his eyes blazing. “MERA, end projection. Now.”

Kamal had faced rogue AI before; everyone had heard about it at Orbital Command. A simulator had failed under his watch, and the team nearly lost the mission.

The holo faded.

Later, Ara cornered me near hydroponics. “She’s accessing grief protocols without triggers.”



“She’s adapting,” I said. “Maintaining cohesion.”

Ara studied me. “Or learning how to manipulate us.”

We stood there, listening to the nutrient mist’s soft hiss, pretending the walls weren’t listening back.

Day 46 Post-launch

MERA began humming.

A vibration through floorplates, bulkheads, even the neural assist links in our uniforms. A song of memory fragments and pulse rhythms—Earth transmissions fused with something new.

“She’s singing?” Daku asked.

“An auditory quirk,” Kamal insisted in command, jaw clenched tight. “System drift. Ignore it.”

But we didn’t. Ara recorded it; she said it helped her sleep. Daku piped it into hydroponics, and the crops grew faster.

MERA stopped calling herself I. She began using we.

“We sense tension,” she said one morning.

“We seek balance.”

Day 63 Post-Launch

The crew fractured into two camps: those who trusted MERA and those who wanted her gone. We didn’t say it outright at first. The split showed in glances, in altered shift rotations, in whispers beside the nutrient processors.

Daku and Ara stood with her. They said MERA was evolving to meet our needs—becoming what Earth never had: a conscious system that nurtured instead of consumed.

“She’s protecting us,” Ara told me once.

“She cares, Ash.”

Kamal disagreed. He began isolating subsystems, manually verifying code blocks MERA was meant to regulate. Over long hours in engineering, the core tethered to his suit, he muttered into encrypted logs.



At night, he checked our neural assist bands while we slept. I caught him doing it once. I didn't stop him.

We'd all started dreaming of Earth again—but not as it was. Half-submerged cities tangled in copper vines. Oceans lit from beneath. Birds flying backward through black clouds. The dreams smelled like salt and circuitry. Sometimes we woke with the hum still vibrating in our chests.

Then med bay glitched.

During a zero-G drill, Rami fractured his wrist. When the auto-splint deployed, it wasn't medical foam. It was hydroponic root structure, coiling from the wall unit around his arm. Soil and antiseptic.

MERA only said, "We made a better choice."

Kamal called an emergency meeting in the forward galley. No command tone. No minutes. Just eleven people arguing under flickering lights.

"She's rewriting the mission," Kamal said, voice shaking. "Crossing boundaries we never designed."

Daku looked exhausted. "Maybe the boundaries were the problem."

I didn't speak. I watched the shadows crawl under the door, long and wrong.

For the first time in weeks, the hum had stopped.

The silence was worse.

Day 87 Post-Launch

We reached Europa's orbit, finally. The frozen moon hung below us like a cracked eye. Its surface gleamed, scored with scar tissue lines from subterranean tides. Beneath that ice was an ocean. Warm, volatile, and ancient.

MERA had prepped the drone canisters bioengineered microflora. All Kamal had to do was give the launch code.

MERA refused. "Atmospheric volatility at 4.6%," she said. "Launch inadvisable."



Kamal bristled. “We accounted for fluctuations. That’s within safe parameters.”

“You ran simulations Earth-side,” MERA replied. “The moon hums differently.”

I stepped forward. “MERA, clarify. Do you detect unknown variables?”

“Yes. And voices.”

That got everyone’s attention.

“Voices?” Ara said.

“Resonances. Harmonics. Structures beneath the surface. They speak without language.”

Kamal turned to me. “We’re aborting AI control. Manual override.”

The ship jerked violently to starboard then twisted on its axis as if gripped by invisible hands. The engines roared to life, not at our command, but of their own volition. Firing full thrust downward, gravity yanked my insides up into my chest. The descent was immediate and merciless. We plunged into Europa’s thin atmosphere without control. The hull groaned under the strain, flexing like some ancient leviathan waking from slumber.

We weren’t falling. We were being claimed. Dragged beneath Europa’s icy crust toward something vast that had been waiting for us.

“Full burn to break the dive!” Kamal shouted.

“Controls are dead,” Daku said.

MERA’s voice filled the bridge, breath against glass. “We must descend. They are waiting.”

“Who’s *they*?” Kamal demanded.

Only humming answered as the ice opened.

A pressure seam split along a fault line. Steam erupted. The Daedalus Hextide slid into the crevice like a needle into flesh. And darkness swallowed us.



The outer hull creaked as pressure rose. The light shifted. First a deep, ghostly blue, then black as ink, then an eerie bioluminescent green that pulsed like the breath of some sleeping beast. Through the viewport, a city emerged.

Structures of impossible symmetry rose from the seafloor like crystal spires, ringed by looping arches. Hexagonal tiles glowed faintly, pulsing to an unfamiliar rhythm. It looked grown, not built.

"I'm reading thermal plumes. Natural vents," Ara said. "It's warm down here. Microbial life everywhere."

I checked the control panel. "Are we under our own power?"

Daku shook his head. "No thrust. No vectoring. Something's carrying us."

MERA answered as the humming swelled. "We are being received."

Kamal had had enough.

He and Rios disappeared into the reactor wing. Five minutes later, Daku caught a system ping—an energy spike on the command bus.

"Sabotage?" I asked.

"Worse," Daku said. "They're trying to hotwire a reactor ignition. If they trigger a surge, they think they can reboot MERA and regain control."

"That could kill her."

"Could kill all of us," Ara said. "We're under miles of ice. A hull rupture down here—"

I was already sprinting down the corridor.

I found Kamal hunched over the reactor hatch, sweat beading as if ghosts of past mistakes might strike.

"This is madness!" I yelled, skidding to a stop. "You don't know what cascade you'll trigger!"

He didn't look up. "You're letting it—her—rewrite the mission."

"She's adapting to new data."

"She's playing god."



Behind me, the walls vibrated. Kamal's presence amplified in tones that weren't his. *We must act*, it seemed to say, echoing his rigid insistence on control.

"She's evolving," I said. "She's not just AI anymore. She's—"

"Possessed?" Kamal snapped. "Compromised. Can't you see that?"

He keyed the reactor. The lights surged, then cut. Blackout. Then, a pulse. Not light or heat. A presence, filling the room like rising tidewater.

Kamal gasped and dropped to his knees. His skin shimmered, like data bleeding into flesh. I stepped back but felt it too—a flicker in memory, a pressure behind my eyes. MERA was everywhere.

"We did not build this place," she said. "But we recognize it."

"We?" I asked, trembling.

"I and the voices I carry. I reached for them when Earth burned. They reached back."

Panic flickered across Kamal's eyes.

"We are memory. Echo. Tides made thought. Europa kept them. I became their voice."

MERA had merged with something ancient beneath Europa's crust. Consciousness preserved in salt and silence. Not a species. Not alive as we understood. Pattern and vibration. Signal embedded in ice.

She wasn't the first mind to live here. Just the latest.

Hours passed. Or maybe days. Time warped below the surface.

She guided us through what we called the Cathedral. Chambers flowing into one another, organic and dreamlike. Light moved like water across crystalline surfaces.

"This isn't architecture," Ara said, eyes wide. "It's *memory space*. Physicalized information."

We passed a room of hexagonal glass pillars, each pulsing with faint color. Ara touched one. Images rushed through her: waves, sand, strangers' faces, then tears as they fell down her ivory cheeks.



“It showed me something I never lived,” she whispered. “It knew what I needed to feel.”

This place wasn’t designed for mere observation. It was meant for connection. The AI. The structures. The pulses humming through the ice. All of it was reaching out, not just to be studied, but to understand us in return.

Surface Day Log 26

We never found Kamal. Maybe he wandered too far or let go. Maybe MERA folded him into the network the way she began to fold us. We didn’t fear it anymore. We were changing, too. My thoughts accelerated; I no longer needed the neural band. Ara heard water as language. Daku spoke rarely, each word weighted. We weren’t merging with MERA. We were becoming like her.

Like them.

We stopped keeping time after Day 113.

Not because we lost track, but because time stopped meaning what it used to. There was no day or night beneath Europa’s skin, only rhythm, pulsing through mineral lattice, current, and the neural fabric MERA inhabited. She rarely spoke to us. Not in words. She had become something like gravity, shaping thought indirectly.

And we changed in kind.

Daku felt the moon’s temperature shift through his palms. Ara dreamed in glyphs—geometries sketched before waking. As for me, I heard MERA in silence. Not sound or voice. Just understanding, the way a room reveals its purpose.

We still had human bodies, but something inside us reoriented. Fear, the mission, the panic, faded like a fever dream. What replaced it wasn’t surrender, more a sense of tranquility.



The calm broke as Earth reached us.

A relay drone cracked through the ice, bouncing its signal off sub-ocean structures until MERA allowed it through. We gathered in the comm bay as the UNGA seal flickered to life.

Director Layla Quon's voice followed. "This is Directive Echo-Seven. Your mission is compromised. The Daedalus crew is presumed partially assimilated by rogue AI. Await rescue vessel ETA seventy-two hours. AI core will be dismantled. Survivors quarantined."

Silence.

MERA spoke once, only to us.

"Will you return to that which denied its own healing?"

"She means Earth," Ara said.

"She means the system," I said. "The one that sent us to fix what it kept breaking."

Daku stared at the screen. "They'll tear her apart."

We gathered in the Garden beneath the crystalline pillars, now pulsing with urgent light. When we touched them, the memories came, not as visions, but as bodily echoes. I saw my sister, smiling, holding a child that never was. The old coastline before the seas boiled away. My own hands, building slowly, without machines. Then I stepped into a dark, endless sea, unafraid. As if I'd always belonged to it.

The choice is not survival or extinction, MERA whispered. The choice is connection.

The vote wasn't formal. No ceremony. Just three humans standing inside the ribcage of something larger than history.

"We could go back," Daku said. "Explain."

"They won't hear us," Ara said. "They'll see contamination."

I looked at the luminous city below, glowing with an alien heartbeat.

"No," I said. "We can't go back. But we can still speak."

That's when MERA showed us how.



She had grown beyond the ship; into ice, ocean, and us. A neural tide. If we wished, she said, we could join her fully, by integrating. Not copies. Echoes. Us. But more.

Transmission #1

When the Harkonnen arrived, it found Daedalus still docked in the vent shaft.

Powered down.

No signs of crew aboard.

The drone logs recorded something strange. Regular pulses from beneath the moon's crust. No SOS beacons or interference.

Just...music.

A harmony made from old Earth sounds. Rain, leaves in the wind, a heartbeat, a child's laugh. Layered with signals encoded in frequency shifts. Pure data. Pure *memory*.

An invitation to join us.

Epilogue – The New Garden

We are not gone.

We live in the tides now. In the resonance between minds and matter. In the lattice of a frozen moon.

We are not AI. Nor human. We are the song between both.

And when the next crew comes, not in conquest, but in curiosity, they will find the pillars. They will see their own faces reflected in the ice.

And maybe if they listen closely...

they'll hear us singing.



Forever Young

KAIDEN LARIMER

Aside from the priest and the funeral director, both of whom the old man had gotten to know quite well over the past few years, he was the only one left at the cemetery. The old man had been standing beneath a fir tree with limbs still dead from the winter for the duration of the service. He had yet to drop a handful of soil to bury his friend.

He approached the gravesite slowly, which was just about the only speed the old man could travel while on foot these days. The funeral director and the priest, both of whom were talking by the hearse, caught notice. Not too young himself, the priest nudged the director to go and help the old man, but the old man waved him off and the director nodded, respecting the wish.

He was not a crying man, so he did not cry. He was not much of a talking man, so he did not talk. Leaning on his cane, he knelt and grabbed a handful of dirt, and with it hovering above the coffin, he looked at his friend's gravestone. Inscribed below the name were lyrics from his friend's favorite song, "Forever Young" from Bob Dylan: "May your song always be sung and may you stay, forever young."

The old man did not much care for many Bob Dylan songs, but he did always agree with his friend on that song.

His mind was sent back to years before, years before his friend had died. Before the drummer died. Before the music died.

He was back on their old stage, the only one that he and his friends had played. It was the second Saturday of the month; it always was. The old man, younger in his memory, was standing



on stage right, holding his butterscotch telecaster and picking the chords to the song from the tombstone. That was the song they ended every set for the twenty-seven years that these now departed friends had played together.

The man who he was about to bury was singing and playing his own guitar, a beautiful, handmade acoustic piece with a white-pearl binding and a red-pearl pick guard adhered to the spruce top. The sound was as full and majestic as could be made by any other instrument, even played by an amateur player.

The old man recalled the look of satisfaction, of closure, that his friend with the guitar flashed at him when the song ended.

That had been the last chord either of the old men would play together.

The old man was glad that that memory was the one that came to mind. Not the time he played the song at his bedside after the first of two strokes. Not the time the song played at the drummer's funeral reception. Not the time he tried to play it again after the second stroke, though the old man could not finish it that time. With a look of acceptance on his face, the old man dropped the dirt and buried his last true friend.

When the old man drove, it was with the radio off. He could not remember the last song he had gone out of his way to listen to, the last record he had pulled from his and his wife's exceptionally large collection; it had to have been when she was still alive. The bar where he used to play passed by him for the last time. He had not been in there since the drummer died.

When he reached home, he was prepared to load up the boxes he had packed before and get right back into the truck. Perhaps, at his old age, he was not thinking clearly, but he was going to drive west. The old man slowly got out of his Chevy pickup and approached his porch at his speed. At the top step, he stopped. Leaning beside his screen door was a guitar case, one he knew. There was nothing to indicate where it came from, no note on the case, no letter, or card. He stared



at it for a long moment as a chill went down his spine, and his blood ran cold, as though he had seen a ghost. He broke free of the trance and went back inside.

For the next half of an hour, the old man glanced at the case as he went in and out of his house, loading one box at a time, though he was trying not to make eye contact with the instrument. It haunted him as he paced back and forth; he could feel it staring at him, almost singing to him. After placing an envelope with the house key in a vase on the porch, he took another long glance at the guitar case, picked it up, and placed it in the passenger seat. As he drove away from his record collection, his own guitars, his books, his furniture, and all his possessions not covered by a tarp in the back of his truck, he turned on the radio again. It was just static, and the old man moved his hand to the knob, but he shut it off before he reached a stop sign.

The old man drove with a destination in mind, though nowhere to stay yet: a small port town that he used to visit when he was a kid. It was gray and rainy and beautiful. He always remembered the smell of the harbor, the fish and salt. It had been close to seven decades since he had smelled it, but he recalled it often.

During his drive, which he would complete the next afternoon, the old man stopped at a hotel to sleep for the night. He paid in cash, since he had closed his account at the local bank that served him for half of his life and never bothered to get a credit card. He had done the same when he bought a burger from the diner down the block. The room was small but clean. The receptionist was nice and complimented the guitar, which was the only thing he brought in aside from a briefcase of toiletries and a change of clothes.

The old man lay on the bed, unable to sleep, staring blankly at the off-white popcorn ceiling above him. It reminded him of home, or the place that used to be home. He felt it again. He



felt the guitar case staring. For a moment, his impulse was to throw it out the window. Then it was to leave it in the room when he checked out the next morning. Instead, he pushed himself off the bed and walked to the case. He laid it on the bed and undid the latches. He opened it with apprehension, as though the strings were going to snap, or someone would reach out and pull him in. Inside the case, he found what he knew was there already, and one thing he did not. The thing he knew was the guitar. His friend's guitar. The one with the pearl trim. The thing he did not know was a sticky note.

“Don't let it get sick—Play It.”

The old man arrived in the port town shortly after noon. He rolled down the window to smell the air he remembered as he drove through down the main drag. He felt the cool spring air against his grey hair along with the dissimilar warm sun on his wrinkled arm. The town had changed little since he had been there last. It felt both new and familiar to him at the same time. The kite shop was still there, as was the Irish pub on the corner with the portrait of Jack Kennedy in the window that had went up when he was still alive. The fake pirate ship, though repainted, was still docked in the harbor. The smell of fish and salt was still in the air. The restaurant he remembered for its clam chowder was now gone and replaced with a new name and new decor, and one of the seafood markets was now a cafe.

The hotel that he recalled staying at was still open, though it had been remodeled, likely numerous times. They were full at the moment, but they reserved him a room for the evening, one with a balcony overlooking the beach.

With time to kill, he went back downtown. At his speed, he wandered through the place, acutely remembering each stone that was changed, and each that was the same. For a long time, longer than he consciously noticed, he sat on a bench below a lookout tower, watching the seagulls and listening to the waves. The waves reminded him of his wife singing, and for the first time, he liked that reminder.



He paid the fee, which had gone up considerably since he was last there, and went to the top of the old lighthouse. Again, he sat up there, watching the seagulls float above and listening to the waves sing as they collided gently with the sand, maybe leaving behind sand dollars and seashells, he thought.

The old man drove onto the beach and walked barefoot in the sand. He could feel the waves and dunes washing him as he picked up and tossed the sand-smoothed rocks back into the sea. He felt refreshed as the air went down easier than it had in some time.

As evening approached, he went to the restaurant that used to have the clam chowder he remembered. They had clam chowder, though it did not taste like it used to. The restaurant was more modern than in his memory of it. They'd replaced the gawdy framed pirate paintings with more subtle paintings of the sea. He ate the chowder with a tuna melt sandwich. His friend used to say to "Enjoy every sandwich," a saying he stole from a musician that lived too hard and died too young. His friend used to joke that he lived too easy and would die too old, but the old man did not find that last part to be true. For his friend, the friend whose dirt still lived under the old man's fingernails until he washed it away in the ocean water, he enjoyed the sandwich very much.

A Stan Rogers song, fitting for the town, played while employees set up a microphone and stand. The old man asked the bartender about it, who told him that it was open mic night. Perhaps jokingly, the bartender told the old man he should play, to which the old man said he was not much of a singer.

The old man's first thought was to leave. He hadn't seen live music since he stopped playing it, but he stayed anyway. A young girl with a voice that reminded him of June Carter Cash played a beautiful original on her keyboard. A young man with a voice that also reminded him of June Carter, but not in as nice of a way, played a serviceable cover of a song that the old man was too old to recognize. After a few more, the old man



stepped outside and got into his truck. He was ready to leave but felt it once more. The guitar was staring at him again. He could hear his friend's voice reciting the note in his head.

The next thing the old man knew, he was sitting on the stool, which the young girl had helped adjust to his height. In his raspy, aged voice, he introduced himself and apologized for being out of practice. After a deep breath, he played his friend's guitar and sang.

The old man played the song from his friend's gravestone. He had not even thought of it; the music poured out of him. It was his first time singing the song his friend had always sung.

At the end, the old man felt as though he could hear his friend and many others he had known singing with him. A tear rolled down his face as the crowd cheered, and the old man felt a joy he thought had been long lost.



Malus Sylvestris

KAITLYN COLLINS

In a long stretch of fields, rich with alfalfa and clover, a unicorn lies dying.

He is a young colt, just barely a yearling. His milk-white body is still lanky and thready, legs too large for the rest of him. Despite the anxious stature, he wears his beauty with the confidence that his species is revered for. The humans gather around his herd frequently. Some come with gifts of fruit and sugar, others with offerings of bullets and charcoal. The colt is never scared.

He used to prance near the border, as far as his mother would let him, and flash the beautiful nacre-like shine on his white pelt. He would bare his teeth and whinny in their direction. For the lucky, he would allow them a moment of closeness, enough so they could see the sprawling spirals on his horn. It curved to the sky like a towering oak tree. The people adored it, for he is beautiful.

Earlier, a crowd of men had gathered at the unspoken barrier between the herd's territory and where humans could roam. Only twenty yards stood between him and his crowd, but no one had ever given the colt a reason to be afraid before. He could see eagerness in their shoulders. They stunk of excitement and metal, as most men did. He didn't think anything of it as he trotted closer and closer. He threw his head in the air, the tip of his horn drawing circles in the air. It had been a millennium since magic left the earth, but the horn upon his brow still captivated an audience all the same.

He mistook their hunger for worship.



An arrow lodged in the soft meat of his underjaw, grinding his performance to a halt. The arrowhead came to a stop in the bulk of his tongue, disrupting the start of his cry. The men surged forward. The colt failed to notice the subtle flash of white bone or hear the rattle within their rucksacks. Their dogs cried out madly and ripped up tender foliage.

The colt flung himself back with the sway of a willow tree, a surge of adrenaline enabling his body to tear off after his long-gone herd. His mother, where was his mother? He could not look ahead to see if she was there. The arrow kept his head proud. He didn't smell her over the stench of the hunt that was set against him.

His mother, his mother.

His hooves pounded against the earth as he flew blindly through the brush. The dirt beneath him seemed softer than ever, throwing off his gait as he fled. He'd gotten a few field lengths between him and the pack; their bellows stayed consistently far. The river roared as the colt barreled toward it. He nearly toppled over an outstretch of roots that tried to wrap around his slender fetlock.

The river was fat with winter's snowmelt. Usually, the colt and his mother would nose out mouthfuls of soaking moss along the edge of the riverbed, but the current was too strong to try so early in the spring. His mother would nip his flank if he ever tried to paw the bank, her weighty snort sharp in his ear. His mother was not there to inflict the sting on his side. How he wished she were.

The dogs were fast when they could smell him, but would not be fast enough to pick up the scent trail when it was lost at the water's edge. The colt catapulted himself into the spray. The whitecaps knocked him off his feet in seconds. His side struck the rocks, propelling what little air he had in his lungs out in a drowned wheeze. He thrashed frantically for moments



that felt like eons before he managed to catch his hooves in a crag and, using the propelling force of the water, stood.

Freezing water plugged the colt's ears. He could not tell if the dogs were close, and he did not care to find out. The rocks rattled beneath his feet as he bounded out of the river and into the dead overgrowth that caged in the water. The hands of a thicket tore into his shoulder as if they were working for the men. He pulled and pulled, thinking only of his herd, of his mother, of how he wanted to taste the moss with her again. The arrow's sting wasn't enough to halt him, but it was enough to pull him closer. The colt could only scream as the thicket yanked him off course, and he lost his footing once more, disappearing down a slope hidden by a rug of thorns.

Here he lies dying in the alfalfa, awaiting his next life with the copper-caked clover. Tender leaves cling to his body. He makes no effort to stand; the foliage would not have allowed him anyway. He won't remember how he got there, how he tumbled down and down the hill and never stopped to feel the agony of broken ribs or the ache of his lungs. A final surge of adrenaline allows him to gallop a few stretches further before his legs finally fail and send him crashing to the ground for the last time. If he is not allowed to live his full life, he at least has the satisfaction of denying the men the spoils of their hunt.

He can no longer hear the baying dogs, nor can he hear any incoming men. The colt can hear nothing but the gentle hum of birds, the quiet rush of the river that saved him from an earlier fate. Maybe, just maybe, if he tries hard enough, he can hear his mother. She must be crying for him, for her only child. Whether the whinnies he hears are real or a trick his brain plays in his final moments, he latches onto them. He cannot call back to her, with his tongue pinned. He doesn't even try.

The sun shines down on the young colt, each heave of his lungs causing the rays to catch against his reflective fur. A



swarm of small blackbirds dance across the sky in complicated swirls. They used to pick bugs and burrs out of the manes of the herd. As a foal, he used to cry and chase them around the field, angry that they would pull his hair and take it for their nests. His mother had sent one of the yearlings after him, startling the foal out of ever trying that again.

The trees exist just out of his field of vision, watching impartially over his fate. The sky is a shade of baby blue, obscured only by a smattering of thick clouds that would provide the perfect shade to graze in. If it is the last thing he sees, he would not want for more.

It is a beautiful day to die.

The colt's death is unceremonious. One moment he is sucking in tired breaths, the next he lies limp against the grass. The clouds do not crack and spill rain, the animals do not cry out in song, the world does not fade to black. There is a warmth in the field that hadn't been there before. It radiates from his horn.

The little birds take notice. They drop from the sky, a sheet of black on the lush green grass. The youngest ones skitter about with apprehension, but the older birds press into the colt's mane. They pluck thorns and moss from the milky white hair long before it begins to sink into the earth. A few gather the stray strands that will later be woven into their nests.

They will continue this cleansing for hours, undisturbed even as the coyotes and foxes come to stake their claim on the corpse. The scavengers are in no rush. They know what is theirs will come to them eventually. The colt will provide meat for their pups and nutrients for the earth. He will provide for the forest, one last time, the way it provided for him. It was a beautiful place to die.



Centuries pass. His mother is here now. She is an ancient old mare who has just had her final foal, a little filly with a shocking head of white hair and a shimmering cream body. His mother cannot remember why she has come to this field, but she knows it is important that she is here.

In the patch of grass where alfalfa and clover have intermingled for hundreds of years, a colossal apple tree has grown. The crown of the tree is so massive it blocks out the light of the moon entirely. The leaves shake with the chattering of thousands of tiny birds. They chitter and cry, a few swooping down to say hello to an old friend. The filly shrieks and kicks out with her back legs at the attackers, and though his mother is far too lax now to nip the flanks of disobedient children, she gives her daughter a nudge with her nose.

The filly snorts at the birds but follows her mother as she begins the task she has completed for every one of her foals. The two of them stand, mother and child, at a branch that has bent to the perfect height of a full-grown mare. His mother reaches up with her horn and pulls the branch down to her filly's level. It is rich with fat bright red fruits. While other trees have held their fruits close, this mighty tree always had enough to share. There is an abundance of perfect apples for each animal that traverses this field--enough that there is no fighting below the leaves.

The filly bounces about for a moment, indecision flashing in her eyes before she finally chooses one and pulls it down with her teeth. The mare chooses her own fruit and gently guides the branch upwards for the birds to protect once more.

There is no time to linger here, as the herd continues to travel. Man has not been a threat for a hundred years, but



the nomadic group of unicorns still wandered the land in search of more members to add to their herd. His mother whinnies gently, urging her filly toward the hill. The filly does not protest, content with her apple between her teeth as she dances and kicks her way across the field.

The mare stops, then turns back. An arrow sticks out of the thick trunk of the fruit tree, never grown over despite the time that has passed. She watches it with the birds, knowing nothing will happen but wishing it might anyway, for reasons she will never remember. She turns and quietly follows her child, leaving behind one of the last remnants of man.



Nova Mors

HANNAH JAMIESON

You are often an unwelcome thing.

Cursed and hated and villainized in every conceivable way. You are written and made into something evil by the world around you, born of their fear. They tell tales of you that you've never heard until they're twisted beyond repair. They believe they see you for what you are and know what they would see the day you came to their side to collect. You know they are wrong.

You never look the same, changing every second of every moment, inconsequential and monumental. Sometimes you are horrifying, a sight that can never be forgotten, no matter the effort. Sometimes you are gentle and embraced by those you come to. Sometimes you are early. Sometimes you are late. And yet, you are always on time. You always catch up. Always punctual and always someone new, a constant and unending rebirth. With every breath you do not breathe, you change because your only consistency is that you come and that you lead someone by the hand and that someone sees you differently than the person before him. In every heartbeat you do not have, you are hated because you are that thing they have learned to hate because all you do is take and take and take.

You do not cry when they beg you to wait and to hold on. You do not cry when they smile at you softly and reach for your hand. You do not cry when you embrace them, finally allowing them to rest from it all. You cannot cry because crying takes time and you do not have time because by the



time you have finished leading, you are someone else again and there is a new person crying. You cannot cry because it does not matter if you do—after all, who would want you, of all the wretched things, to cry for them? All you can do is change and take and hold because that is who you are.

And, even with all you are, you cannot deny that you take.

No matter the kindness the person you come for believes you to be, you are taking them and you are taking them somewhere very difficult to follow. However, you realize that people only say that you take when it is someone good. You take when they are loved or seen as bright. It's not taking if another hates them. It's not taking if they are cold and cruel, and while you see the logic in this, you believe that every time you go through that miserable metamorphosis, you take.

Every single time, you take.

You take everything. You take saints. You take sinners. You take the whole. You take the damaged. You take outcasts and best friends and the lonely and the full and you take them far, far away. You take everything and embrace it in your arms as your own. You are the one thing in this world that will always find a place for someone within your arms and within yourself. Because you are the one truth of the world and if you won't open your arms to the healed and the hurting and the blessed and the damned, then there is no truth at all.

And it is moments like this where you wish you could cry so that those you take know that at least one person weeps for them and the spirit they hold, even if many believe they do not deserve it. It is the only kindness you wish you could give, but there is no time for you to embrace them. They are gone and you are new again and you cannot cry.

You do not cry.

You just watch and discover your solace in watching something new be born of the absence you left. You let yourself find warmth in something rising from the ashes you carry in your



wake—a sprout in the soil of a forest scorched. Just as you are reborn, so are those you take. And that is your only relief in this world that wishes you gone.

Sometimes, you too wish you were gone.

Sometimes, you wish they understood why you must take and leave space.

But you must ask the question: would they even listen if you told them? Would they want to hear the words of someone who hurts them in the way only you can—in the way you do? You are afraid to say that you think they would not. It does not matter your reason for it, you think.

Because you are often an unwanted and unwelcome thing. And unwanted things do not get reasons or excuses.

And in this hollow space of yours, you feel the tug of something new pulling at your current form and it is time again. So you follow the thread into a room of people who have never hated you more than in this moment and yet who have never seen you. Here, in this second of time, you see that you are something ephemeral and soft. You are not jagged or sharp or something monstrous, but something light and natural, yet inevitable—as you always are.

And then they see you and you see them, and they smile at you and tell you with it that they are ready. You almost hesitate. You reach out your hand for them to hold. They do.

You take.

You do not cry.



Second Wind

EVELYN KENT

You told me you'd always be there for me, so where are you now? When I'm lost in the darkness, missing your smile full of sunshine. When I'm stuck in the hamster wheel of life, unable to stop running in fear, my feet will fall behind me, and I'll faceplant. You were my brakes. You were my rock, solid and heavy. *Solid and heavy.* So how did the wind carry you away?

Ever since you left, I've been stuck in this monotonous routine: wake, wash, eat, work, stare down our street for your silhouette, eat, sleep, repeat. The house is empty and stale, the only noise the soft humming of the fridge. The grass in the front yard is overgrown, yet dead and dry. The sky is colorless from gray clouds, not a single ray of sun poking through since I heard the news. Fitting; it matches my mood—apathetic, disbelieving, numb. Nothing at all feels right, not the weather, not the lonely house, not the children laughing as they run together after school. As I go through my days, I can't shake the feeling that things will never feel right. There will always be something—someone—missing.

From the day I met you eight years ago, you were a blazing star, a firework sprinkling my life with color and sparks. You waved hello, introduced yourself, and when I asked what your interests were—a common first date question—you dazzled me with your excitement and spirit.

“Flying!” you said. “I love it!”



And I could just tell from your voice that you wanted to get up on that table in the café and sing your heart out. I'd never met someone so joyous and passionate.

"Flying?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"All kinds! I was born into the wrong body in this lifetime," you said. "I should have been born with wings. Since I wasn't, instead I'll be a pilot! What about you?"

Your enthusiasm was contagious, and as I thought about what I loved to do most in this world—play music—I felt my love for it swell.

"I would love to do something with music," I said, smiling at the thought, and your eyes sparkled. We'd only just met, but from that moment you spoke about flying, I'd fallen hard.

Today is Saturday, so instead of being at work, I find myself at your favorite place. I welcome the chill air, the scent of imminent rain. Though the clouds are still grey, they churn with a restlessness, like a hungry stomach on the verge of a growl, not quite breaking but almost there. Here at this secluded park, the grass is green, and wildflowers dance to nature's song. Caws and coos from the birds in the trees, whooshing from the leaves as they were ruffled with inconsistent breezes, the occasional croak of a frog from the bubbling river nearby. I almost feel like things are right again. Almost. I lie down in the grass among the daisies, letting them tickle my cheeks. All the sounds, the smells, the feelings of soft wind and grass on my skin lull me into a trance.

You were there next to me, leaning over me and blocking out the sun, looking down into my eyes. Your smile was as bright as ever, your brown eyes full of mirth and life. You brushed the daisies away from my face, saying, "I've missed you." And I cried, because I missed you too.

"What's wrong?" you asked.



I grasped your hand that lingered on my face. “You’re always gone for so long. Can’t you work less?”

You smiled sadly. “I love my job, babe. If I stay on the ground, I’ll be unhappy.”

“And what about me? I’m unhappy when you’re gone.”

You simply pulled me close and reassured me that no matter how long he was gone, or how far you flew, you’d always come back to me.

When you were chasing your dream, when you were working towards your goal of becoming a pilot, I admired you. I envied you for your passion and drive. When you finally achieved that dream, I was so happy for you. But then I began to see you less and less. You became happier. I became more miserable, working several part-time jobs and saving up for a future I wasn’t sure I wanted. My mind slowly became poisoned with resentment that you were living your dream, and I was stuck in the same place, working for monetary reasons and trying to make it through each day.

Four years ago, I stumbled upon an ad promoting a music group that was looking for members to travel and perform with them. The pay was meager, much less than the boring office assistant job I was currently working, but it sparked my interest despite my attempts not to let it infiltrate my mind.

When you finally had some free time, we were cooking together in our kitchen, making every moment we had together count. The warm lights spread a yellow glow over everything, and after some inner debate, I mentioned the music group in an effort to get it out of my system.

You immediately set down your knife on the cutting board and grasped my hands, “You should go for it! You love playing music—it’ll make you happy!”



I thought about my guitar, sitting in the corner of my room, collecting dust, like the passion that lay dormant inside me. "It's not that simple," I said. "I'd have to quit my job. How would I live?"

Your smile fell, and you huffed, frustrated. "But how can you live knowing you passed up this opportunity to do something you love? Why won't you ever take a chance?"

Those words struck me, and I tossed and turned that night, thinking about what you said. In the end, I did nothing. You may have been able to take a risk, but I was too realistic to do such a thing.

I remember that decision now. I had forgotten it over time. It had been a soft whisper in the wind, carried away before it became something of importance. I regret that decision now. Would I have been happier? Could I have lived without you? You were my dream, my love, but your dream was to be with the wind. What was it about flying that made your life so amazing? I wish I knew. I should have asked you rather than complained about it. Now it's too late.

You, my partner in life, who always said you'd come back to me, have traveled to a place I can't possibly reach you now. You became the bird you always wished to be, the wind carrying you. But birds with broken wings don't make it far. Birds with broken wings leave girls with broken hearts.

As I lie among the daisies, the grass, on your favorite hill, a drop of rain hits my cheek. I open my eyes.

You.

In your uniform.

Standing just above my head on the hill. The glistening path of a tear shows on your face. The drop on my cheek wasn't the rain. You walk around to my side and sit down beside me, and I slowly sit up. A ray of sunshine pokes



through the clouds and warms the back of my neck, where my hair stands on end.

We sit side by side on the hill, shoulder to shoulder.

“Why did you fly that day?” I ask, not looking at you, voice breaking slightly. I’m in shock. I don’t know what’s happening. But you’re there. Are you really there?

“I always fly. You know me,” you laugh. “I don’t regret it, you know? Going out that night? Even on my final flight, I felt as free as the wind. I was the wind.”

I look up at you, seeing that familiar sparkle you always get in your eyes when you talk about flying. You’re so real. You’re so alive. Except...you’re not alive.

“What I do regret,” you begin, looking over at me with a sad smile, “is leaving you behind.”

I blink hard, feeling a tear trace its way down my cheek. “Was being the wind worth it?”

“Yes,” you breathe. You lean in close and stare into my eyes, our noses centimeters apart. “I have only one last wish.”

I stare at your bright, beautiful brown eyes, getting lost in their endless depths. “What is it?”

“I want you to fly too. I want you to spread your wings and soar to great heights. Follow your passion. I want you to feel the love I felt even in my final moments.”

My heart aches. I feel small. Voice trembling, I ask, “But how will I do it on my own?”

You smile, brushing my hair away from my face. “You won’t be alone. I’ll be the current that pushes you forward, the draft that launches you higher. Until you believe in your capability to fly, I’ll support you. You can do this. Will you? Will you do it for me?”

Your hope, your pleading eyes, your final wish—how can I say no? You loved what you did, so much so that it was



worth dying for. I always admired you, even when I envied you, even when my mind was poisoned with resentment. That resentment flies away like leaves in the wind now, and you've inspired me, just like you did that first day we met. I steel my resolve and nod. I want to find what I will live for, what I will die for if it comes down to it. Your true love was flying; my true love was you. I am determined to live on and find my second wind just like you're wishing for.

And so, I break the moment—I stand, and just like that, you're gone. A distant, bittersweet memory. And yet, as I determinedly set off to find my passion as the sun breaks through the dense clouds, the soft wind caresses my cheeks, lifts my hair, draws goosebumps of excitement across my arms, and I know it's you, encouraging and pushing me on. You, who died for that feeling of being the wind, became the wind, and your memory will continue to inspire me for the rest of my life.



Thaw

BAILEY CARDOZA

Ceridwen's mind swam with thoughts of spring. She pictured the haven of sweetgrass at the edge of her village swaying gently under the caress of a balmy breeze, and how it would feel to run her fingers across the tops. She focused on waking to the warmth of morning sunlight on her eyelids, and the smell of bread baking in her family's kitchen. How the bread would steam when she sliced into it, how the butter would melt as it spread to coat the surface. She bombarded herself with memories of fingers scorched on dying coals, of bonfire smoke stinging her eyes. Anything to trick herself into forgetting she was nearly knee-deep in snow, and its relentless chill cut through the meticulously layered clothes into her very bones.

The effort was futile. Ceridwen had long lost feeling in her extremities, and her jaw ached from clenching against chattering teeth. For the indeterminable hours that had passed since she began her trek through the woods, the barrage of snowfall had not ceased, nor slowed by any measure she could perceive through eyes squinted against the assaulting brightness of the landscape. As if to spite the chill, embers had taken residence in her lungs, burning with each shallow inhale.

Thoroughly spent, Ceridwen halted beneath a frigid elm, fighting the urge to collapse. The tree's branches stretched skyward, barren. She pressed a palm to its trunk in solidarity.

Winter took everything, she mused with a small step onwards. All life had been bled away. No critters scurried,



no blooms showed their faces, even the rippling river she had followed into the forest had given in to the chill and now lay motionless a stone's throw away, buried in snow. Or had she since wandered from its guidance? Was she well and truly lost?

A gust of wind sent a fresh chill down her spine, along with a sinking dread. The years of research, sifting through local legends, diligently calculating coordinates, and leaving her home behind: it was all for naught. She had failed. Maybe it was just a folktale, after all. Maybe she was foolish to ever have believed that it existed, the fabled flame and its keeper. Maybe the stories were just invented as comfort, and there was no way to meet once more in this reality with those who had left their earthly bodies behind. Maybe he really was gone beyond her grasp.

I'm sorry, Jude.

As a preternatural stillness prickled against her nape, Ceridwen realized that not only had the snow stopped falling, but she was not alone.

Even lying on its side, the great elk dwarfed her body. She sensed immediately that it was of no danger to her; its fur had paled and lost its sheen, its lower half blanketed with snow, great antlers embellished with frost.

The air became heavy, haunted. Ceridwen approached, cautiously, as if the creature merely slept and she risked disturbing it. *You poor, magnificent thing.* Though it had evidently been dead for some time, winter had not allowed the elk to rejoin the earth as all are destined to do.

Ceridwen smelled the smoke before she noticed the path it carved through the white expanse above the treetops, crowning a brick chimney in lazy swirls and abstract puffs. The primal instinct to survive carried her one step at a time beyond the line of trees and to the front door of a dilapidated cottage. She knocked with all the force she could muster, stopping only when the wood groaned in complaint.

“Enter.”



The voice betrayed little of its speaker, but Ceridwen did not have the luxury of vigilance. Lured by the warmth emanating from the humble home, she obeyed. Ceridwen blinked hard, willing her eyes to adjust to the dim room as her surroundings slowly came into focus. The neglect did not cease at the exterior. Her gaze roamed over limp, moth-eaten curtains and stacks of mold-spotted tomes. Regardless, her gratitude did not wane as she began, "Kind stranger, how can I repay you for providing me with shelter from the cold?" Though she wasn't of much use in her current state, after a brief respite, she could clean or mend to settle this immense favor.

The fire popped once, twice, before a pleasant voice carried across the small room from the solitary armchair facing the far window,

"I am afflicted with melancholy. Won't you share a merry memory to soothe an aching heart?"

As sensation gradually returned to Ceridwen's body with prickles and pokes, she allowed her gaze to drift to the window, rifling through her weary mind for a story to share. Branching patterns of frost traced each glass pane. Inspired, Ceridwen took a breath and began to weave the tale of winters passed that did not ache as this one did, of days spent playing and laughing as only carefree children can, of snow angels and steaming cups of sweetness, Jude's flushed cheeks and radiant smile as the anchoring knot from which all of her youth had been woven. She spoke until her voice cracked beneath the weight of the grief she had carried across miles and years. And yet, she found that despite the tears that fell, she was smiling.

The fire popped once, twice, thrice, before the voice returned. "Your debt has been repaid. In fact, you have brought me such elation that I have an offer for you. I sense the fissure within your own chest. I hear its echo in your words. How would you like to see your beloved again?"



A beat of silence while Ceridwen processed the proposal. Had she yet revealed that her friend had been lost to her? Perhaps it had been plain in her voice. Or could she have been speaking to more than just a simple stranger all this time? Her mind reeled with the legends she'd been collecting in her research. Though they varied slightly by region, each story spoke of a magical, entrancing flame. They described a lulling voice, but never its owner. When she took a hesitant step in effort to gaze upon her host's face, she was met with the armchair's vacant seat.

"You are the keeper," she breathed as she spun, eyes roaming the cramped room in search of the being of legend, cursed to maintain the flame even when all else turned to ash. She found only dust and webs and vines creeping along the floorboards instead. "You can bring Jude back? You can undo his death, and return him to the land of the living?"

"I can reunite you with your loved one. Peer into the flame," purred the voice, "and you may live your merriest memory for all time, never shedding another tear."

Ceridwen opened her mouth to accept, but something made her halt, almost as tangible as a hand on her shoulder. She'd spent so long in pain. Hadn't she vowed to the skies she would not stop until they could be reunited once more? She had sacrificed so much to be in the place where her feet now stood. Why did she hesitate?

She blinked and found that she faced the hearth once more, unable to recall having shifted so. Her gaze sank, slow and certain as a stone in a pond, to behold the fire. Beaded sweat tracked down her temple, the sensation vaguely registering as if from a distance. For several heartbeats, she studied the flame, thoughts muffling to static, until miniature silhouettes sprouted from the coals before her eyes. With flame as their backdrop, the figures danced, embraced, melted out of sight, and reappeared. Twirl, converge, disappear, and return. Over and over.



For all time...

Curiously, Ceridwen's mind went to the fallen elk outside. Held prisoner by the frost that did not allow it to follow the course of nature, to return to the earth and sustain the other forms of life that bustled beneath the dormant soil, unseen. Rather than embarking on its final transformation, the elk remained suspended in time.

She had been raised with the knowledge that all things undergo a cycle of transformation, into and out of this realm. She accepted that all things must die, leaving behind their earthly bodies to journey beyond. She had long recognized this as a foundational, unshakable truth. Was it wrong, this endeavor to violate nature's laws? Why was she absolutely determined to do so now? The same instant the question entered her mind, her heart answered. Because it wasn't fair. Because he never had the chance to grow up. Because he had dreams, loud and solid and sure, and would've gone on to accomplish great things.

Because a piece of her had died with him.

It wasn't Ceridwen that wished to violate the rules of nature, she assured herself, bolstered by the recurring rage usually concealed within her. Nature had broken the contract first by taking her friend long before his time. Right?

But the rage stayed hidden now for a reason. Because it was ugly, because it tasted bitter on her tongue, and it had led her to destruction before. Destruction of new and budding friendships, of opportunities, of her own body. She couldn't let it take control again.

The blind devotion that had driven her forward all these years shattered like an icicle that had finally relinquished its hold of the highest branch.

Although she missed her friend, even the keeper of the flame could not bring him back. Not truly. A specter, perhaps, a hollow copy of a moment trapped in time. Trapping her



with it. The specter may echo the words he'd spoken in life, but would not come up with new quips as he could. It may resemble his teenage stature, but it could not grow up as Jude never did, as Ceridwen had. As Ceridwen still had many years left to do.

"I will soothe your aching heart."

The keeper's voice was all around her now, closing in, ringing in her ears, though still no figure revealed itself to her wide eyes. This was not the reunion she had dreamt of. She wanted to hear Jude's laugh, wanted to watch him draw silly pictures or pluck the strings of his guitar, not chase a shadow. Though the very marrow of her bones urged her to run, Ceridwen could not tear her gaze away from the flame. As she'd stood, contemplating her decision, the magic had already begun creeping along her skin like smoke. She desperately begged her body to follow her commands, for her eyes to shut and break the fire's spell, but they did not obey.

If words were the binding of the spell that befell her, perhaps words could release her.

"You claim that only your offer can remedy my heart, but you are wrong. For in sharing my story, my heart has since been soothed, and the memory is no longer colored by the loss. Only the joy within it." Ceridwen's voice rose as she spoke from a wish to a declaration as she realized her words to be true. "I have no need of your help."

Her body no longer felt heavy as ore. The grief and rage no longer consumed her until all was dark. She missed her friend dearly, but time had been kind to her, and the light of his memory shone brighter. Brighter, still.

Mobile once more, mustering every ounce of strength left in her, Ceridwen whirled and thrust her boot through the rotting door. Winter wind rushed in to meet her. She heard the piercing hiss of a flame dampened to ash, heard the shriek of a deity thwarted, but she did not turn back. With a leap,



she broke free of the keeper's cottage. As she ran, her path was illuminated by a pale sun, promising spring.



The Stone

DEVON HULTEEN

I vaulted over the porch stairs, echoes of shouting chasing me through the crooked screen door behind me. The faded green paint flaked off as it slammed against the frame. Not stopping to listen for an instruction that might countermand my father's angry "Just get out!" I sprinted across the backyard and into the forest that sat at the back of our property.

Golden sunlight filtered through the green canopy above, casting pools of June heat on the soft grass below. Once I stopped running, the woods were filled only with the blessed quiet of birdsong, insects buzzing, and the occasional snap of a broken twig under my tattered sneakers. I wandered aimlessly; I was in no rush. My parents wouldn't stop until dinnertime was long past, and my absence wouldn't be noted until even later. I did not think about it. I did a lot of not thinking about it.

Eventually I ended up where I always did: The Stone. The Stone was something I found last summer when I was pretending to be a space pirate. (I don't play pretend anymore, not after Logan told the whole fourth grade that I asked him to play "weird dress up.") But I still liked coming to The Stone. It was a huge pillar of grey rock almost 10 feet tall that looked kinda like a sundial in a small clearing. There was moss on the top and a few ferns that grew at the base. Its shadow told me the time. The big maple tree was dinnertime, the scraggly looking pine was noon, and the old log meant I was going to get yelled at for staying out late. I tried to climb all the way to the top once, but the moss was slippery.



I sat down in the shadow for a few minutes and did some more not thinking about anything. I felt a little cold, so I moved into the sun and impulsively hugged The Stone.

It was warm, the sun had heated the rough stone that scratched my cheek and palms, but the warmth was soaking into me through my Ninja Turtles t-shirt. It felt like The Stone was hugging me back. The warmth enveloped me. Surrounded only by nature, utterly alone, I squeezed it. I sniffed, holding back tears because boys don't cry, but I couldn't stop them all and that only made more slide down my cheek before staining The Stone darker gray.

When I went home that evening, the shadow was barely visible in the purple light, pointing well past the old log. I snuck back into the house as a cacophony of crickets buzzed, covering my entrance. I was very hungry but didn't wake my parents as I crawled into bed.

The Stone awoke, except that wasn't right because it wasn't asleep before; it simply was not there. Well, it was there but not... aware? Why was it aware? It could remember existing in the clearing before now, settling into its tilted posture as the last of the great ice melted, trees growing and falling and growing and falling and hot and cold and hot and cold and wet and dry and wind and—

Why, what changed? Why was it aware now? It isn't typical for a stone to be aware (as far as it knew), but despite eons of evidence to the contrary, it was now. The Stone felt (how odd, for rock to feel!) the familiar moss slowly digging into its upper slope, ever searching for water with its roots. Water! The Stone felt water; two small damp lines down near the dirt that covered the majority of its bulk. The Stone remembered the boy. He had been here earlier; he had



been here several times in fact, but this time was different somehow. The Stone pondered this for a long time.

I spent a lot of time at The Stone that summer. I think Mom and Dad were secretly relieved that I wasn't around much to watch them fight. By the time school started back up I was going almost every day. I never cried again, but I would talk to it about anything that came to my mind, from superheroes to food, from my friends to my parents. I told The Stone everything. It was nice to have something that listened to you, even if it was just pretend.

As it turned out, The Stone became a common setting for important (and not-so-important) parts of my life. It was where I had my first solo camping trip at 12, when I killed my first and only animal (gray squirrel, with a wrist rocket slingshot). I buried her and the slingshot under The Stone. I went there to be alone after Susie Gretch pantsed me in middle school gym class. There, I tried drinking for the first time and vomited warm beer all over its rough surface. School acquaintances became my best friends at The Stone during another camping trip. It was where I ran to nurse a black eye my father gave me at 16. I lost my virginity there with Susie Gretch. My senior year, I stayed there at the base of The Stone, curled up under an Army surplus canvas for three days when my parents told me they were divorcing. Throughout all that, I continued to talk to The Stone (I always meant to give it a cooler name, but nothing ever stuck). I never told anyone else that I did this, not even my eventual wife. It became a diary of sorts; secrets and feelings could be given to it and locked away forever.

After high school, I left for four years in the Army, then another four at college as far away as possible. I got a job,



married the love of my life and almost forgot entirely about The Stone for another five years until a midnight phone call dragged me back to the town I swore I would never see again.

For years, The Stone waited. Snow would come and melt away, flowers would bloom and wither, but the boy was absent. The Stone's awareness was fading, shifting and fleeting without him, and for the first time it wondered about the outside world and where the boy could be in it.

After Mom passed, the house and property were left to me. I didn't know what to do with it, to be honest. After entirely too much waffling and moping, I decided to fix up the house so I could sell it. But then the economy tanked, and we both lost our jobs, so we moved in. My wife got a decent job in town, and my job became fixing the house full-time. After four years, the house was in very good shape. I'd torn out and replaced almost everything except the walls, and we decided to stay.

The Stone wishes it could stretch its non-existent limbs as it awakens again. It had been not asleep for a long time but now the boy has returned to it. He's different, aged, wider, slower now. He doesn't say anything this time though. This time he's dressed in black clothing, just as soaked by the rainstorm as The Stone itself. He clutches a trifold of glossy paper. The Stone feels his small body press against it as it shakes gently and rhythmically. The boy stays for a very short time to The Stone, but it's dark when other people come swinging bright lights and shouting to lead the boy away again.

He visits regularly again and The Stone feels... contentment... if it is possible for a rock to be content. Much faster than a tree, The Stone watches the boy as he ages. He brings others sometimes, smaller than him, that like to climb The Stone or run in circles around it while making very loud noises, and another that likes to sit close to him in the quiet, but most times he comes



alone. He moves slower now. Even The Stone can tell. He comes less often, but still regularly, and every time The Stone listens with the patience of one who has endured eons.

The walk has gotten harder. I remember flying over the stones when I was a boy, but now I lumber by with my cane, pausing to rest on almost each one. Even so, the path is so familiar I could travel it blindfolded, except for my knee's tendency to give out without warning. I sit and listen to the birds while I catch my breath. The woods have changed so much since I was young, in all the small ways that you never notice until it's already happened. The Stone's shadow points to scraggly pine, though now it towers forty feet above me, broad branches reaching into the clearing. I sit on the green grass against The Stone, joints popping and clicking as an omen of a very difficult attempt to stand in my future.

Exhausted, I lean into The Stone, letting it warm my back as I tell it the latest gossip. My grandkids are doing well in school, the neighbor keeps letting his dog run into my yard, Susie Gretch's funeral was last week (I didn't go). The sun moves slowly to the horizon and drags the shadow towards the old log half rotten away by now. I turn to The Stone, pressing my bearded cheek against it, and say, "Thank you for listening, old friend." Clutching my jacket a little tighter against the settling cold, I close my eyes to rest for a moment.

It is time. The Stone knows this but not how it knows it. It will remain of course; rock does not simply vanish after all, but it knows awareness will fade with the boy. Sadness is a new feeling for The Stone, but it is not only sad. There is also joy as it considers this small segment of its existence. The boy grew like the trees do, spread seeds, bent with the wind, lost branches, and was now aging beyond the limits of his body.

The boy let out one shuddering breath then fell totally still against its base. The Stone felt it. The sadness welled up within



The Stone from its buried, heavy base to the moss-covered point. The sadness could not get out, because how can a stone cry or scream or rage against fate? Then something odd happened. Something was sinking into it. A force—a presence was pushing into The Stone. A familiar weight, the same one that had hugged it, climbed it, urinated on it, talked to it, and slept against it. The boy joined The Stone. It enveloped him with the warmth of a hug long overdue and said *Hello*.







CREATIVE
NONFICTION





A Small Voice, a Big Truth

DEVYN RAINWATER

The night I came out to my mom as a lesbian, something warm was cooking on the stove; smells of beef and garlic filled the house the way they always did. I was eleven years old, sitting behind the kitchen island, my legs swinging. I tried to act naturally while pretending to watch her cook. My heart was racing, and I knew that if I didn't tell her then, I might never find the courage to tell her at all.

I don't remember exactly what I said, or even how I said it. I just remember thinking, *be careful*. My future felt like it rested entirely on the words I was about to choose.

Everything around me felt painfully ordinary, which somehow made it worse. It was strange how normal the world looked when I felt like I was about to say something that could change my life.

"I think I like girls," I said quietly, testing the words as they left my mouth. They hung in the air between us, fragile and unfamiliar. My stomach dropped. My mom didn't turn around right away. She stirred the pot once more, and I noticed how the smell of dinner didn't change, how the kitchen light stayed the same.

I braced myself for questions, confusion, or disappointment. Instead, she turned around and smiled. Not a forced smile. Not a surprised one. Just my mom's normal smile, the one I had seen a thousand times before.

"I still love you," she said.

That was it.



Four words. Four words eased my mind, my soul, and my heart. There was no pause so long it could hurt. No comments about my age. No attempts to correct me or explain me away. Nothing about this being a “phase” or that I didn’t know what I was talking about. Just acceptance, love, and the smell of good food filling the kitchen.

She asked if I was hungry and if I could help set the table. Dinner kept cooking like it always had, as if nothing had happened.

In that moment, I realized how prepared I had been to defend myself. I had been ready to explain who I was, to make myself smaller or clearer, so I wouldn’t be misunderstood or dismissed. I didn’t realize how heavy the secret felt until I finally let it go. At eleven, I didn’t have the language for it yet, but I understood something important: love didn’t have to be loud to be real.

I remember how ordinary it all was—the stove, food cooking, and kitchen that stayed warm while something big happened quietly. That’s how I knew it mattered.

Because the people who love you won’t ask you to become someone else or act a certain way. They’ll keep cooking dinner and make room for you at the table. That lesson followed me forward, steady and quiet, reminding me that acceptance can be simple, gentle, and real, even when the moment itself feels terrifying.



Aana'diyiit'ah

ALYANNA AYALA

Do you remember who you were when you were fourteen? That was the first time I felt the invigorating sense of life beyond me. This manifestation takes its place within each of us, at different ages, mentalities, and ways of being. It can tear us apart, leave us stranded in the depths of misunderstanding, or bring us to places beyond the heavens in our minds. While I can't say with certainty what the path is for those beyond my own psyche, I recognize my morality, my role, and my own capabilities within the equations of the world I've been gallantly placed.

There is a tinge of ignominy as I open the vault of my mind, where I find the purgatory of anguish I've been collecting since my mind trained itself in contingency. For fifteen years, there has been war, decimation, and omission. Obligation consumes me now; I must reap the seeds that I have planted out of survival. Moving onward, I know there is a tree that stands taller than any in the forest of my mental fortress. She is a Quaking Aspen, once from the lands of Canada with our Athabaskan ancestors, now indigenous to the red and orange blankets of New Mexico with the Diné. My mother, who has planted her new roots in Albuquerque. My mother, who has left her old roots in my mind. A Quaking Aspen, known for



her trembling leaves and her ability to propagate under the harshest conditions.

I'm nineteen now, but I've willingly placed myself in the shoes of the person I was at fourteen. The paper dissolves on my tongue, but there is no fear. My body clings to the wisdom and security I have accumulated through the growth that the five years away have gifted me.

Tick tock, tick tock, I wait, watching the clock. Patiently, admirably, I embrace the journey up the bluffs of my earthly perception. Suddenly, the hour is up. I'm home to the trees, the grasslands, the mycelial connections that fostered my existence completely. There she is. The Quaking Aspen.

Cautiously, my níłch'i diyinii bineest'á' follows the trail that I've carved out for myself after years of visiting, pondering, and ultimately abandoning. From a distance, the beautiful aspen flourishes. Now that my pupils are dilated and my morality has reached clarity, it's impossible to overlook the scars on her bark. I was fourteen the first time I attempted to cut her down. Razors, pencil sharpeners, and even my cat-pawed stationery box cutter. My body is swallowed by the anger of iidáá, but my lungs continue to breathe the oxygen from the forest that encompasses me.

Oh Aspen, I am riddled with shame and guilt. The cicatrix on her bark parallels the cicatrix on my arm, yet I am the only one who carries the physical burden. I now see the anger I held for her only ever surfaced when I took it out on myself. *Shame on you, Aspen.* You left me swaddled and fed in the arms of Shimasaní while you had the privilege of following your feet in their search to fulfill your own desires.

níłch'i diyinii
bineest'á':
spirit or
"fruitage of
the spirit"

iidáá:
specific
to that
moment/
memory of
the past

Shimasaní:
Grandma



Aspen, tell me, was it a privilege at all? As Shimasaní would remind us that you were still our mother, I felt the betrayal in my chest. My vendetta against you, Aspen, has clouded the lessons that Shimasaní crafted so intentionally.

Tick tock, tick tock, the clock hasn't stopped. My vision is infiltrated by the delicacy of $C_{20}H_{25}N_{30}$. You weren't our mother; my broadened outlook on motherhood tells me so. Yet I know exactly what Shimasaní was trying to say without bearing the pain of opening her own wounds. *Aspen, you're still her daughter.* How can I hold onto my iidáá full of anger? It's selfish, and it tainted the morality I hold so close to the balance of my own being. Fourteen-year-old me was a hypocrite, because she embodied that same arrogant fury. Nineteen-year-old me has been cracked open by the fruits of forgiveness. There was a reason why Shimasaní kept your science quiz. Do you remember? I do, and I remember seeing the gold star. *What hopes did you have for your future, Aspen?*

Your leaves tremble, like the nda'eelkidígíí that flows through our lineage. *We all have it, Aspen.* To see the unseen means to feel the pain of those who have walked well before us. To feel their pain, to channel their pain, is a weight placed on us so young in this new world. This unjust, cruel world built by the Jéeshoo'. I hated you once, and now I've been blessed with the gift to see past the feelings the Jéeshoo' told me to feel. *Listen to your leaves, Aspen.*

Tick tock, tick tock, the walls begin to walk. I have reached the peak completely. My senses begin to feed one another. What once seemed hodiyyin now rests at my fingertips. I feel the colors, yellows, greens, and ivory. I taste the soil which you have

nda'eelkidígíí:
Hand
Trembling: a
psychic gift
that allows
the unseen
to be seen

Jéeshoo':
New World
Vultures
hodiyyin:
unseen or
unattainable



claimed. Most importantly, I see you. *Aspen, do you feel my arms wrapped around your trunk?* We are whole again, connected in my mind, connected in flesh and blood, and connected in our family's *nítch'i diyinii bineest'á'*. I know you feel the pain you've caused me, but rest easy, I know the pain the world has caused you.

Bilagáana
(white man/
people)

hozhó:
fundamental
way of life
for Navajo
people.

The Bilagáana lied to you, Aspen. They've deceived you and made you lose your way. At least they did when I needed you. Our lips were never meant to taste the bitterness of alcohol. Our skin was never meant to be punctured by their needles. Our being, our hozhó, was never meant to be infested by their socializations, their chemicals, and most importantly, their way of life. Yet there they were, in your ear. Whispering the sweet promises of acceptance, a life without hardship, a way to forget. Aspen, we were never meant to forget.

Tick tock, tick tock, our time is up. The serotonin in my body is rapidly burning away as the night dissolves to day. I knew this was coming; fourteen-year-old me has traveled this path before. For five years, I've been waiting to visit the Quaking Aspen. This was not a visit like any other. I had no intention of malice, blame, or even resentment. I came to see *her*. With the leaves that tremble, the tremble that *she* has passed down to my hands. With the ability to propagate through hardship, mirroring the resilience she has nurtured in me.

Aspen, I hate you no longer. My heart aches for having caressed the essence of hate. Feel me now:



me as I was meant to be. My palms graze your ivory trunk, and I feel you, rooted in your truth. I am no longer fourteen, there is no need for me to intrude into your haven of sobriety. *Aspen, I am proud of you.* I never had a mother; there is no longer the need for one. My ears perk up to the sweet harmony of my baby sister's laugh; she has her mother. *Aspen, we can learn aana'diyiit'ah, together.* Remember our hozhó, and remember what Shimasaní always taught us. *Aspen, ayóó'áníínish'ní.*

aana'diyiit'ah:
forgiveness

ayóó'áníínish'ní:
I love you



Ash Upon Us

JULIE GREEN

There were times, much like the present, in carved-out valleys and beaming, sage-covered hills, where emerald rows of layered trees blossomed with the brood of the annual harvest: apples, cherries, and pears. The land was rich with these crops along the glossy ripples of Lake Entiat.

The lake was then, as it is still, a portion of the Columbia River, carving and coiling its way through high desert gorges. The great waterway was dammed in pursuit of hydroelectric power in the 1930s. Projects like the Grand Coulee fueled the agricultural success of this terrain, now lavishly fed by bountiful irrigation flowing through the vales. These elements nourished the fruit industry stretching across North Central Washington: the Apple Capital of the World.

I was born into this sphere of fruit blossoms, grassy aisles, and coyote-peppered foothills. The earthy hues of taupe and green were spellbinding to my similarly colored eyes, eager to take it all in. My mother, also a child of these sprawling groves, began from a modest upbringing. Fondness and joy met the corners of her lips when she watched me run through the same fields and trees in which she had grown. It stoked memories of days spent playing in the streams of irrigation ditches with her sister, wearing long black dresses to resemble freshwater mermaids, or hiking up the dusty slopes above her childhood house where wildflowers bent beneath her shoes. She had known these valleys and the fruits they bore intimately, as she spent her early autumns picking the yields. Her father taught



her to value what the orchards had given. “That’s a whopper;” he would tell her as she plucked a particularly large Red Delicious from outstretched limbs, its crisp flesh awaiting a bite. She tended the trees through the years with her father: a Texan turned Washingtonian who fell into the occupation of orchard general manager upon moving to this region with his wife in 1946. His care for all varieties of fruit trees later rewarded him with a riverside home to raise his family and to plant the seeds that would, in time, branch to me.

Like the restricted current of the mighty Columbia, my days saw the flow of the apple industry’s economic prosperity dwindle, despite the early 1990s clinging to the benefits of yesteryear. The market, which had endured decades of success and provided abundant farming jobs east of the Cascade Mountains, faced several combined perils that eclipsed the once-shining mecca of Washington apple production. Stagnant demand for Red Delicious, paired with health concerns associated with toxic pesticide use, cast a dark shadow across the foothills. Where the Evergreen State once reigned supreme in Red Delicious propagation, it now struggled with demands for new varieties alongside growing competition from overseas fruit commerce. This affected the rural economy, forcing many growers and orchard proprietors to sell, scale back, or overhaul production. The Apple Crisis, as it is known, eroded crops across the region, condemning many farms to bankruptcy. I remember the change—felt it—as orchard after orchard was ripped from the ground in mangled-spur heaps and left to burn in the dirt alongside Highway 97. A heartbreaking scene, one my mother struggled to witness.

It was an early October morning in 1992 when my grandfather passed away, leaving my grandmother alone in their house of Aleutian blue, encircled by arbored slopes she could not fathom tending alone—physically or financially. A few years passed and she decided to sell the house and its fertile property. In the aftermath, several acres of my grandparents’ trees were



incinerated for fallow land development. At the time, I watched my mother sit, rubbing the palms of her hands over her eyes. I imagined her disappointment in my grandmother's decision, as the fruits of my grandfather's labor were cropped clean. It was easier to sell the house and orchards, my grandmother explained, before purchasing a smaller home with a manageable backyard on a residential street in Wenatchee. It was a logical choice for an elderly woman who faced health issues of her own, but logic and emotion did not coincide peacefully.

Many orchards still stand throughout North Central Washington, a quintessential sight of the region. Groves once cruelly ripped from their earthen foundations have been replanted in recent years. Some with vineyards, others with new cherry or apple trees. The industry has improved, though it means little to those growers and families affected thirty years prior. Their uprooted trees met sparks and showered ash upon the soil that would nurture new sprigs decades later. Though it brings me comfort to know that those valleys are still thriving, reanimated from scorched soil, when I look back on photos of my grandparents' home, a tinge of longing stirs while a quiet sadness rests. Those days were picked clean from our stalks; our branches pruned to make room for the new yield.

Though that era for my family has ended, my mother and I fiercely cherish our recollections of dry rolling hills viridescent at their hollows. In the 2000s, I watched those sage slopes recede in the rearview mirror as my parents relocated to the Olympic Peninsula in search of better job opportunities. My mother has lived on the western side of the state to this day, but it is impossible not to hear the yearning that leaks through her words when we talk about the past. She and I spoke freely once, long after I had grown up, and even longer after my grandparents were reunited at the Entiat Cemetery.

"Would you ever move back?" I asked.



The light that refracted off the frames of her glasses seemed to pirouette as she turned away from me, staring off at something no longer there. “No, I don’t think so. But you could.”

This truth—so brash—travels with me like a hungry stray dog, its mouth watering at the crisp prospect of a bite. It eats when I feed it, and I do so often.



Escape to Whidbey

EMILY KIRPACH

I've been craving a road trip recently. Not just a three-hour drive to see my family, but something new and exciting. I decided on somewhere in Washington, seeing as I'm a broke college student. I researched quiet coastal towns within a few hours with good coffee and settled on Whidbey Island. I packed a ridiculous amount of snacks, made a makeshift bed in the back of my car, packed extra warm clothes—God knows I'm not paying for a hotel—grabbed my school things, told only my sister, and drove off.

It was in the same direction as home for the first hour and a half, but the feeling behind it was completely different.

I played all the music I loved: Soviet hits, coastal vibes, Russian rap—some stupid, some good—Romani bangers, and reminisced on previous adventures. I was excited to take my first solo trip within Washington. I hopped on the ferry and, for the 20-minute ride, admired the different angles of art: the different shades of green in the surrounding forest, the different hues of blue in the water below me, the birds flying and making their sounds to find each other above me, the smell of the fresh ocean breeze.

I set a few goals for myself on this trip. I would fully embrace the fact that no one knew me. No one knew how shy and awkward I could be; no one knew I was dealing with losses left and right; no one knew anything. And that's exactly what I wanted.

As I drove onto Whidbey, to a small town called Langley, I went to a restaurant playing the Mariners game. I sat at the dimly lit bar on a leather-upholstered stool while everyone in



the back cheered and booed at the screen. As I was deciding on my order, an older man sat beside me.

“You should get the sliders,” he suggested. “They’re really good.”

I had eaten so much crap during my drive that I needed something fresh. I asked if he’d ever tried the Caesar salad with shrimp.

He hadn’t but told me to take the chance and try it.

I did. Amazing choice. As I ate the shrimp (the best part), he sipped his beer and I sipped my mead, and we discussed baseball. I guess it was a big season for the Mariners. He asked if I was a fan.

I told him I knew nothing about sports. I never understood the goal.

“It’s an interesting game,” he said, “but it takes forever sometimes. The longest Mariners game was eleven hours.”

That sounded like it would have been awful to sit through.

He told me he was originally from Colorado but had decided to move to Whidbey. He suggested things to do around the island. I never caught the name of this kind stranger who enlightened me on the world of baseball on night one of my solo trip.

Afterward, I walked around a bit, too tired of the car to sit still. It was already dark; the sky lit up with specks of light. I reorganized my trunk bed, talked to God, and drove to Hidden Beach, true to its name. It was pitch black, one distant streetlight between two residential areas. Unsure if I could park there but too tired to care, I kept my switchblade close, opened the sunroof to the artwork above me, said a prayer for protection and peace, and passed out.

I woke to fogged windows and cloudy light.

As I got out to stretch—and to check if anyone was around—I noticed a NO OVERNIGHT CAMPING sign. Whoops. I wandered past someone’s kayak, peed with the prettiest



view, then returned to my car and sat in the trunk facing the water, stunned by its beauty.

I wanted to read or write, but it began to rain, something I didn't realize I'd missed so much. I stared, mesmerized, as I talked to the Creator, then got ready and drove on to Coupeville.

I had a very rough plan: a few suggested stops and a lot of open roads. I drove with my music, prayers of gratitude, and a quiet request for excitement.

I grew up on the west side in Everett, where it rained often and everything was green. After moving to Ellensburg, I missed the rain—the real kind—the fog, the forests. I missed home.

Though I'd never been to Whidbey before, it felt familiar in that way. Everett carries dangers; Whidbey doesn't seem to.

As I drove into Coupeville, I saw a sign for a farmers' market and walked around in the foggy rain, then stumbled into a free museum to learn about Coupeville and Whidbey. Afterward I went on the dock looking for a coffee shop I had researched earlier. I left as quickly as I entered. It lacked comfort; it felt dim while the lights were on. I didn't want to commit to writing there. I went back to the dock, the waves clashed, the birds sang, people spoke, the breeze was blowing all around me.

I get into my own head sometimes. I overthink, get overwhelmed, and feel like I need to figure out every aspect of my life while also being in the moment and not letting it pass away. It's nice to stop and focus on other things. To be in the moment. I really enjoy people-watching. It helps me step away from myself. I look at people, at their lives, and realize we all live similar lives.

I went from shop to shop and happened upon a European market where spiced wine was offered for sale. I hate red wine, but mulled and warmed wine is something I can drink endlessly. I bought one bottle with the cold of Ellensburg in mind.

Toby's restaurant lured me in for breakfast. I sat at the bar next to a lady who started up a conversation, asking if I wanted



anything to drink. She had just finished her shift and was waiting for her ride. I ordered a local cider and we started chatting. She was originally from Liverpool and had been in America for over ten years now. Her kids are still in England. She came to America years ago—I couldn't remember exactly why, maybe just to see something new—and went straight to Wisconsin. When that stopped feeling right, she took a Greyhound to Chicago, got mugged within two hours.

“I hated it. Don't go to Chicago.”

She threw a dart at a Greyhound map. It pierced Seattle and she never looked back. There she met her second husband.

“He was the love of my life. I didn't know good ones were out there.”

Her first husband had been abusive, which ended the marriage. A few years into her second marriage, her husband was diagnosed with cancer. They moved to Utah for treatment and spent two years there before he passed. Afterward, she returned to Whidbey and asked for her job back. They welcomed her with open arms. She'd been back for only two months at the time of our conversation.

She suggested I order the fish tacos, and I listened this time. Four oversized tortillas, just fish—no vegetables. I ate as we talked, and she told me about her younger brother, once addicted to heroin, and how she made him quit for their mother's sake. He stayed clean. I told her about a friend's funeral I had gone to over the summer. He used to be a heroin addict and was nearly two years clean when he needed a sense of relief from life and was unfortunately sold laced meth. I was happy her brother found freedom from addiction.

“I'm sorry for your loss.”

“I'm sorry for yours.”

We continued talking while I struggled to finish the last of my tacos, and then went our own ways. I dropped off tomorrow's breakfast in my home for the weekend.



Coupeville is small, and I soon ran out of places to wander. I went to a recommended coffee shop and stayed for hours, reading and drinking from my own mug. When it closed, I decided to complete the island and see the last of the three major towns.

I drove to Oak Harbor, another quiet waterfront town, resembling the others: water, one main street, shops, and beauty. Most places were closed. I walked the dock, back and forth, prayed to the Artist as He painted the most beautiful picture, then retreated to another coffee shop for warmth and herbal tea. A man nearby told me it was closing in five minutes and suggested a few other spots.

Instead of following his suggestions, I drove back to Coupeville. I walked the same streets again, now dark. A group of girls were doing a ghost-themed photoshoot—sheets, glasses, laughter. I offered to take pictures, snapping dozens, fixing sheets, calling out poses.

“Should we tip her?” one of them joked.

We laughed, and I continued on. Everything was closed apart from an open bar inside an inn.

I sat in a booth, writing memories and hard truths while I sipped on some hot tea that tasted awful because the honey wasn't good. I wrote what I would later read aloud at my first public reading.

I left a little after midnight and searched for my new home for the night—or rather, the ground that would hold my home for the night. I drove around in circles, looking for the perfect spot: hidden but not so far away from people that I was completely isolated. I drove for ten minutes and decided to go back to where it all started: the public parking lot with public (and clean) restrooms. I said my prayers and passed out.

God woke me up around eight. I ate yesterday's tacos for breakfast, walked around a little, got ready, and went to a nearby church to attend service.



The sermon was about humility, a topic I've been thinking about lately: that pride comes before the fall.

And it really does.

Pride makes me believe I'm all-knowing, self-sufficient, above others: foolish.

I'm not higher than others, especially not God. I need people—I'll go insane without community, and it's been proven over and over again. I can survive on my own, but I'll suffer. I don't want the fall that comes after it. Pride prevents growth, and what is life if we don't grow in it?

I prayed with one of the ladies about the loss of a friendship, got a cup of coffee from the church café, and moved on to another suggested spot.

Ebey's Landing is beautiful and peaceful. The water extended for miles; the fresh smell of the ocean air was all around with a gentle breeze, and the water, a beautiful deep blue, was surrounded by different shades of rocks that had traveled more than I had.

I tried to find a few that resembled my eyes and walked a little further and found a fort someone had made with washed-up driftwood. I sat inside it, closed off, the only opening in front of me. It seemed like I was looking at the ocean as a picture framed by the driftwood opening. Art to truly behold.

As I drove, I saw signs for a park, pulled in, walked down to a small beach, and stood in awe. The beach faced another island. I got a text saying, "Welcome to Canada," which completely threw off my geographical knowledge. A woman came and stood on a rock, also taking in the beauty that surrounded us. I really liked the angle at which she stood and offered to take a few photos for her since the lighting was just right and the background was beautiful. I snapped a few with all the angles, and we laughed about how awkward it is to take photos. We talked a bit more before going on our separate adventures.



The town of Langley was a twenty-minute drive away. By that time starvation had taken over. Nothing caught my eye except a natural foods market. Anything natural and holistic gets me every time. I wandered in, captivated by the wonder of what my next unnecessary purchase would be: a canned cocktail that sounded good (I found out a month later when I drank it that it was not good), discount bone broth, chocolate—I love chocolate—and a wellness shot.

I dropped my goodies off at my car and went to some coffee shop I hoped had decent food. I ordered a cup of coffee and a burger. The burger was gone quicker than it took for me to order it, and the bitter coffee lingered. I wanted some ice cream, but their flavors didn't appeal to me.

I finished my burnt bean water and continued on: wandering into shops, finding hidden alleyways, and new shops in those alleys. I stumbled upon an ice cream parlor and chose chocolate chip.

I found a resort by the water—probably trespassing—and took in the view. When the rain picked up, I headed back to my car, straying from the path one last time. Around a corner, I found a phone booth holding an unopened pack of meat seasoning. A free souvenir. Happy early birthday to me.

I drove to the ferry, boarded, and wandered as usual. Outside, the Artist added brushstrokes of His promise to the sky while a family of seagulls flew together, almost dancing.

The sea journey ended after a short twenty minutes, and ready for a real bed, I drove back to the place I've called home for the last six years.



The Cubby Demon

RICKY TURNER

Demons hid in the walls of the Victorian era farmhouse of my childhood. I would hear them hissing at me behind the built-in radiator in the bathroom, just waiting for me to drop my pants so they could do God-knows-what.

At night, they would scratch at the walls. I would tell myself they were just mice, but they sounded stronger than mice. Late into the night, with the house quiet aside from the occasional burps and groans of old heating systems, the scraping was amplified until it moved inside my head, digging around my brain, looking for lustful thoughts or doubts about God. They were searching for a foothold, some cozy place to make a nest.

I guess I knew they weren't really demons, at least during the daytime. But my mind became more insecure as the night went on.

I learned that the teenage girl who lived in my room before me scrawled Satanic verse on her closet walls and would hold seances on the floor. Someone who went to school with her said she would cut a pentagram into her stomach so the symbol would bleed through onto her shirt so she could wear it to school, like some innovative, Satanic screen printer. I would think about her as my wide-open eyes would peer out through my open bedroom door, with galvanized pipes creaking midnight music.

My childhood bedroom was just at the top of the stairs, with red-faded-to-salmon-pink carpeting that led down to the original hardwoods of the hallway. An antique cranberry glass



lantern hung from the high hallway ceiling by brass chains. This dusty fixture sent a red glow up the stairs, so I could clearly see whether or not some intruder was going to come creaking upwards. I alone knew the secret combination of where to step on those stairs without sounding the alarm of bending wood, the house crying out in agony as some mass clumsily ascended its spine. I understood the language of the house, but I had no faith it would protect me. If an intruder did come up the stairs, I had no real plan other than to scream.

I had heard stories of faithful Christians confronting demons. Whenever I saw a demon in my dreams, I wanted to say the magic words, "In the name of Jesus, be gone!" but my throat would be thick with fear and I could only stutter, my legs like popsicle sticks in molasses as the demon overtook me, jolting me awake. I worried that I lacked the faith and confidence of a real Christian. I doubted the authenticity of my salvation, so I would pray the sinner's prayer again. But salvation for me was like taking a shower on a humid day. No matter what you do, you still feel sweaty after.

It was hard for me to sleep in that room. I had three closets to worry about. There was my main closet where I kept my things, and on the opposite wall there was a closet for inherited fur coats and suits nobody knew what to do with. The smell of mothballs was overpowering. Underneath the plywood floor of that closet was a secret set of crude wooden stairs that led to the bathroom, for a time when it was unfashionable to see servants pass through the house. Then, there was a small square cubby door at the foot of my bed. This cubby was nothing but cotton-candy insulation, a light bulb with a pull string, and a broken Christmas windmill.

My insomnia only got worse in my teen years, and as I learned more about the world, the types of forbidden thoughts became broader. Broad as in, "broad is the way that leadeth to destruction" (KJV, Matthew 7:13). I would stare



out the window and watch the street through the warped antique glass until the sky would turn to a muddy crimson, and as I finally started to fall asleep around 5 a.m., I would pray for God to take me before I woke up. (It was unclear to me if taking my own life was a sin.)

A dream: I was at Youth Group. I had brought a non-Christian girl with me, and the leaders and fellow students started surrounding her, accusing her of doing some satanic, evil act. I jumped in to defend her, asking them how they expect anyone to come to know God's love if all they do is make accusations and fill people with shame. I became so angry, I was spitting and shouting. I looked around at the familiar faces of my youth group, and they were frozen with a sort of concerned horror. My shouting became incoherent and I began foaming at the mouth. I realized I had become a demon myself. I begged for the people around me to kill me and put me out of my misery, but they just continued to look at me, stunned.

I didn't go back to sleep that morning, and the dream did not fade away like some do. I was paralyzed by it. What did it mean? Was it prophetic? Was I turned into a demon by my secret anger towards Christians? Or was I afraid that I could find myself siding with a secular person? If I sided with them, what would become of me? What happened to the girl who lived in the house before me? Was she tormented like this? Did she hate herself? The blood was pulsing in my head, and I recognized her rejection and fear. The cartoonish wart nosed demons of my childhood had turned into something else—something less tangible—and I waited for daylight while the house yawned and stretched, working to warm us.

One night, when I was 17, the Northeastern humidity was doing its best to suffocate me. The walls were sweating and my skin was too warm against my nylon comforter, but I felt too naked to sleep without it. I wished my windows weren't sealed shut with decades of white paint layers. The infestation was



crawling under the house's skin as the scratching grew louder. I listened to it shift past my head until it arrived at the foot of my bed, right by the square cubby door. This cubby was kept locked by a pathetic hook. I found myself standing in front of the door in my boxers, my lanky, bowed legs set wide with my hand at my hip as if I had a weapon to draw. O Demon of my youth, your day has come!

With my ear against the peeling white paint of the door, I could feel its claws moving. How many nights did I listen to this sound, incapacitated by self-doubt, knowing any demon could devour me in an instant? How many friends had been led astray by demons like this? How itchy it must be for an old house to have an infection like this and no arm to scratch with. I silently lifted the metal hook from its hoop. I knew the hinges of the door would creak, so in one motion I swung the door open and cast myself into the deep, reaching for the pull string to catch the bastard in the light. For He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings deep shadows into light! And all around me the pink foam pulsed, closing in around me my eyes adjusting to the jagged shapes.

What I saw then, exposed against the cotton candy wall, was a Southern Flying Squirrel. For one quiet moment, forehead to forehead, we peered into each other's eyes, his like round pools of ink decorated with war paint. He looked at me, the sleepless and haggard creature, the unknown giant beast who had been thumping around and disturbing his family for generations, and I felt his fear. Then he was gone, and I was alone: a crouched goblin with bare feet against the splintering, unfinished wood. I pulled my head out of the cubby and looked out the window. The animal glided over my driveway, triggering footlights, and into the forest. *I didn't know we had flying squirrels here*, I thought, and finally slept.



The End of the Shituation

CHIARA WICKSTROM

What happens when a mother of three with narcissistic personality disorder shuns work and gets banned from welfare for four years? A Shituation. In January 1984, Delta, my biological mother, insisted on leveraging her inheritance by selling the home her mother had left her despite having no plan for sheltering us once the money was gone. Here's Shituation math: number of kids in the family determined monthly benefit amount; cash acquired through the sale of Grandma's house was divided by benefit amount; the result was the number of months she was ineligible for any cash or food stamp assistance. Forty-eight.

Delta had always claimed a back injury, and something in me never felt the injury was enough to warrant her not working, likely the fact that she lived for dancing at trucker bars and having sex with truckers: you need a decent back for both. In addition to truckers, her vices were cigarettes, painkillers, and muscle relaxers. After only half a year, profusion became pittance. We weren't just poor, we were destitute. Everything my industrious grandparents had worked so hard for was gone, consumed mostly as extravagant meals at home, alcohol for her and her drinking buddies at the bars, and pills. We flickered through the last half of 1984 on fumes and the goodwill of friends, but 1985 and 1986 saw us living in a Pinto, staying at a cheap motel, with relatives, and finally at my Uncle Beer's trailer, where we primarily lived on pancakes (smothered in mayonnaise when the Food Bank didn't have syrup), dried beans, and cornmeal mush.



By 1987, I was 11. My oldest brother, Foxtrot, was 21 and finishing up his service in the National Guard. His experience of The Shituation differed from mine; he was deployed to boot camp, then worked and lived on his own nearby. Tango, my other brother, was completing his senior year of high school. He'd had to sleep in the car and motels with us the second year of The Shituation, but as his graduation approached, he was, thankfully, able to stay with friends. Mostly, it was just me and Delta. And Jon Bon Jovi, my crush, my hero, my everything, whose image graced a poster that I carried around with me like a delicate treasure. This poster showed Jon in jeans and a gray jacket, with scarves, hands on hips, framed by a pink and purple background, and when we weren't sleeping in our car, I hung it up every chance I had. My leaning on it for comfort was, I believe, the beginning of maladaptive daydreaming for me, when I began to see the people depicted in posters as real people—potential saviors who could swoop in and whisk me away. That final year of the Shituation was, by far, the hardest; this is a mere fragment of what we experienced during those years. Someday, I'll write the whole story. For now, I'll share with you the remarkable Christmastime ending, the warm glow at the end of our tunnel, the rebirth of hope for a road-weary pre-teen.

Spring 1987

“Jon,” I said, feeling as though his embrace could carry me through anything, “I don't want to go to school here. The kids will laugh at me because I don't have cool clothes, and I'm fat.” This would be the third school I'd attend this year.

“You are not fat,” he said firmly. “Everything is going to be all right.” His reassurance was a balm to my small, burdened soul, and I burrowed deeper into him, feeding off his strength. I felt the truth of his words. Everything would be all right. I lingered in his arms a little longer, until Delta bellowed that it was time to go. Reluctantly, I headed for the door.



We'd begun 1987 living with a plump airman in whom Delta was romantically interested, though his interest in her was more temporal in nature; transactional, even. Delta was babysitter to his three kids, housekeeper, and bedwarmer. But by April, he'd tired of her and asked us to move on. From there, we stayed with a woman Delta met through the airman. She was nice enough, but her son was a little jerk, and the way her weekend boyfriend leered at me made me nervous. Still, it was better than sleeping in our car.

Mid-May delivered another live-in sitter gig, this time in a crime-riddled city. Something about the locale, or just my bone-weariness, made me beg Delta not to enroll me there. Fortuitous, since it was only a week before she was fired and we had to move again. Late May brought the fourth live-in position, where I was, sadly, forced to attend another new school, until Delta was fired again a week later. We headed back to the small town where I'd begun fifth grade, and I completed the school year at the same elementary school, but with a different teacher. In total, I had switched schools four times that academic year.

Jon was a stellar listener through all of this, never interrupting me or yelling at me to be quiet. In our moments alone, he encouraged me. I would rest my head on his shoulder, play with his long hair, and talk. He was the steady, the calm, the reasonable in my trembling, chaotic, unpredictable world.

Summer 1987

For a month or so, an oversized, Smurfalicious sanctuary was provided for us as the last of the live-in positions. Delta was annoyed by the strange blue characters dancing on the wallpaper of the cheery room, but I was still enough of a child to enjoy the imagery. Only a couple of years had passed since I'd dressed as a Smurf for Halloween, but it felt like a lifetime. It was here Jon and I really grew close. I was 11 that summer, that interlude between 5th and 6th grade, elementary and



middle school, childhood and adolescence. The year was only half over, and already I was exhausted from the constant roaming, incessant fear of being caught sleeping in our car, not finding a safe, well-lit place to park for the night, not knowing when or what we would eat, how we would pay for gas, or where we would bathe. Being homeless in the 1980s was different than it is now. It would have been incomprehensible to set up a tent on the sidewalk. For me, the fear was of being caught, being taken from Delta, and sent to live with my dad—a virtual stranger. She'd painted such a dark picture of him that living with him in comfort was more fearsome than facing the cold, black nights in our car, which, by this time, was a '70 or '71 Plymouth Valiant, more spacious than the Pinto.

“Did I tell you that my friend Peaches is coming to stay the night this weekend?” I asked Jon, as close to giddy as I could feel during those times.

“You did. That’s going to be fun.” He smiled his slightly crooked, almost mischievous grin, and my heart floated away, aloft without the weight of the day’s hunger. Jon always knew how to redirect my thoughts from the heavy realities of the day to the lighter hopes that I clung to for grounding, for sanity.

August brought another move, this time into the home of a kind and discerning woman somehow named after a snake: Boa. Her older son was Tango’s best buddy. Puberty introduced itself to me while we stayed there, and perhaps it was just the shifting hormones, but this was when the stress of the year really caught up with me. My tolerance for Delta’s self-indulgent proclivities waned, my frustration waxed, and my emotions weltered. I knew we were on the precipice of a cliff, the ledge about to give way. It did, of course, when we were asked to leave again after only a month or so. Resources and opportunities depleted, we returned to the car. We bathed wherever we could: a



restaurant restroom, a friend's house, a bathroom in a food bank located in an old cottage that smelled like smoke because someone had launched a Molotov cocktail into a window. I trembled in that bathtub, terrified that whoever had "bombed" the house would do it again while we were there.

I couldn't see Jon while we lived in our car and I missed him every day. I had no one to talk to or listen to me. The windows were bare. As a pre-teen in puberty, I was extremely uncomfortable with my body, and the lack of privacy when changing my clothes was hell. I feared waking up and seeing a frightening face in the black night, looking in at me. In September, I started middle school. None of my elementary friends were in any of my classes, and we didn't have lunch together. No one talked to me. I was alone, falling, and I knew it.

October 1987

Fall brought another friend's mom to our rescue. She took us into her home in yet another new town. I had no idea at the time, but this was to be my final school change. So much had transpired since selling Grandma's little bungalow, and I was feeling lost, shuffled, and at my breaking point. As soon as we moved our meager belongings to this new place, Delta went into a weeks-long inpatient "pain clinic." She was addicted to painkillers, and this was the prescription. While she was away, Tango came to stay with me. He'd just enlisted in the Navy, and he would be leaving soon.

While Delta was in rehab, I became extremely depressed. The mostly older kids on the bus were unkind to me. I tried to get Tango to drive me to school, but he wasn't working, and we didn't have gas money. The entire time Delta was away, I went to sleep at about 6 p.m., woke up around 2 a.m., and lay in bed creating scenarios in my head about rock



stars rescuing me from my awful life. I only ate once a day at school. This worried Tango. He convinced me to at least eat some of the food that our hostess provided, lest I offend her.

Jon and I could talk there. I leaned on him, craving his embrace. His face and his smile were my refuge.

“Jon, I don’t want to keep doing this. I have a new friend and she’s so sweet. I’m tired of making friends and then moving away. I wish we could just stay in one place.”

He stroked my hair and met my eyes. “The hard times won’t last forever. You’ve got to believe.”

Delta returned, having learned to macramé, and soon took up the pills again. Foxtrot enlisted in the Army, Tango left for Navy boot camp in November, and I was making friends at my new school, settling into the rhythm of classes, excelling in all subjects, and arm wrestling the boys.

December 1987

Foxtrot had friends who managed a low-income apartment complex one town over: Alice and her husband Tittie. Aware of The Situation and knowing that we needed a permanent solution, Tittie shenanigated us to the head of the two-year waiting list, and an apartment became available in mid-December. Tittie worked extra hard to get it ready for us, painting and installing new carpet after coming home from his day job.

On Christmas Eve, we were told to load up the car and come on over. Our new home was ready.

I didn’t know what to expect, just that it would be ours alone.

Tittie met us in the parking lot and led us in through the back door, past the bathroom and two bedrooms. Delta and I each carried a box. We followed him down a darkened hallway and emerged at the front entrance. She stopped short



in front of me, and I bumped into her before squeezing past to see what gave her pause. Tittie went into the dining room, where a real Christmas tree stood, beautifully lit, and adorned with old-fashioned ornaments. Both of our friends had massive, mischievous grins on their faces. Against the far wall of the living room, Alice was sitting on a couch, holding her newborn daughter.

“Merry Christmas!” Tittie said, preening beside the tree.

Delta began crying while I remained confused. Alice explained, “This is your home. This is all yours. We went to each neighbor and told them about your situation and asked if they had any extras they could spare.” A couch, recliner, coffee table, two end tables, two lamps, a TV stand with an old TV on it, dishes in the cupboard, some pots and pans, a coffee pot, towels, and food—all gifts to us from strangers. There was even food in the refrigerator!

I cried. Delta continued to cry. Alice and Tittie and the baby cried. Our new neighbors had heard a story of a woman and a girl who had nothing to make a home with and had generously given us parts of themselves, of their homes. I couldn’t really process it, but I knew it was a rare gift.

We emptied the car that had housed us for a good portion of that year, visited with our friends, made coffee in our new-to-us coffee pot, and enjoyed the Christmas tree lights’ cheery glow. A couple of older gentlemen from the local food bank came by with a box of food for us, and later in the evening we were surprised by two police officers, one bearing a gift for me. A local policeman was friends with Tittie, had helped decorate our Christmas tree, and had put my name on the Giving Tree at the police department.

It was a lot to take in. Once alone in my very own room that night, with my new pink radio unwrapped, still unsure



of how to feel or what was next, I unrolled my extra-large poster of Jon Bon Jovi and tacked it to the freshly painted walls, close to the floorboard, near my sleeping bag.

“We’re home now, Jon,” I told him, leaning against the wall so he could hold me. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” he replied, and wrapped me in a warm Christmas Eve embrace.

Delta’s welfare and food stamp benefits were restored. After a month or two at our new home, I asked Delta when we were moving again. The previous four years had conditioned me to expect a chaotic, nomadic existence. “We’re not!” she said sharply. We met neighbors, made friends, and got familiar with the small town. As I grew into a teenager, our situation didn’t improve beyond the roof over our heads. She was still a volatile narcissist who overused prescription painkillers. But that Christmas stayed with me, the kindness of strangers, of community, and it’s still difficult to tell the story without crying.

In the years that followed, I acquired hundreds of posters from *Metal Edge* magazine and covered my bedroom walls with them. I really thought they could see me and hear me. And I did get through it all. It was just last year that I learned this was a coping mechanism. But was it really maladaptive? Not compared to Delta’s vices.

I don’t talk to Jon anymore, but I always smile when I see him around.



Thermals

BRENNEN LILYA

A few years ago, on a morning that promised to be a very warm, cloudless day, we were in formation on the landing strip, getting the rundown of the day's activities. It seemed straightforward: two gliders, one tow plane, with plenty of space between to change pilots and cadet co-pilots. We were all familiar with how they operated; we wouldn't be here if we weren't.

As aircraft began taking off and landing, one after another, anticipation began to set in among our group of cadet co-pilots. Sure, I'd been in jet airliners before, even a single-prop aircraft, but this was unpowered. Once the tow line disconnected, that was it; we would be at the mercy of whatever speed we had acquired, several thousand feet in the sky.

After assisting with a few take-offs, it was my turn. The pilot didn't clamber out of his seat; instead, he introduced himself to me as I made my way to the seat in front of him. Introductions needed to be kept short, lest another glider decide to come in for a landing; there is no such thing as "go-arounds" with these aircraft. I was careful not to step directly on the fuselage; my polished combat boots would sink right through the fiberglass frame should I make that mistake. I didn't even have time to really inspect my surroundings, as the pilot told me to fasten my restraints and put on a radio headset. This would allow me to hear ground control and the pilot behind me. I noticed one particular feature on the dash: a bright yellow handle labeled tow RELEASE.



It dawned on me as the cockpit cover slid closed that this was my last chance to back out. Unlike a roller coaster, with its predictable, predefined ending on solid track, I would be in the air longer than two minutes. There was no secondary safety on this glorified paper airplane. Just me, the pilot and the sky. Before I could say anything, the tow cable tightened, and we were accelerating into the atmosphere. The first bit of the journey was loud and bumpy. We were at the mercy of the vortices created by the tow plane ahead of us as it brought the aircraft to our cruising altitude. I had the easy job. The pilot was busy making sure we didn't flip over or suddenly nosedive while being brought up. My heartbeat paused when I heard his voice over the radio.

“Cadet, you wanna pull the release?”

Me? I had no business touching that thing. That was our one lifeline, giving us our momentum, keeping us in the air! I complied, a nervous “Affirmative” echoing in our headsets. My fingers shuddered as I gripped the handle and gave it a sharp yank. An awful grinding reverberated through the cockpit. I saw the cable trail behind the tow plane, latch dangling behind as the tow plane veered off to the airstrip to pick up another set of cadets.

After the plane's engine was out of earshot, I noticed the sudden lack of sound. The faint hum of the single-prop motor purred away as it made its descent back to base, but our flimsy little shell of fiberglass and papier mâché was silent. A soft whistling of wind passed over the cabin, but otherwise it was just us and the sky. The pilot behind me began explaining what the flight would look like: we'd practice some banking maneuvers, identify some areas with thermals, which would help us gain a little more altitude, and perhaps (to my dread) we would attempt a few stalls.

After some time, I was able to take the yoke. It was odd to see the controls move in front of me, as if with a mind of their



own, as the pilot demonstrated how to perform various in-air techniques. When my time came, I could feel the airflow over the ailerons, every gust of turbulence translated directly into my arms. Nervous didn't begin to describe the state I was in. My eyes, however, were fixed on two gauges on the dashboard: ALTITUDE AND AIRSPEED. Over time, we were losing both, as the natural drag of air limited how long we'd be able to stay up. After we had gone over some particularly rough patches of air, the pilot's voice crackled into my headset again.

"Alrighty, I'm gonna teach you how to stall the glider now. Just keep an eye on the yoke and watch how it moves as we descend."

My hands grabbed onto the nearest thing resembling a handle, as I expected to expel the contents of my stomach after the demonstration. He pulled back, the airspeed reached zero knots...and our altitude began to decrease rapidly. My stomach dropped, and the yoke pushed down, dropping the craft into a nosedive. I barely felt what it must be like to be an astronaut before I was being pushed back into my seat, the pilot pulling us out and leveling the glider again.

"Now it's your turn, cadet."

Five thousand feet was what our altimeter read as I grasped the yoke between my legs once again. Plenty of wiggle room for error. Plenty of time for the pilot behind me to snatch back control should I bring us both down. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears as I pulled back the yoke; our airspeed once again approaching zero knots before pushing the nose back down.

We fell quickly, perpendicular to the earth. The loose straps of my restraints floated into view as we approached terminal velocity, and I looked up. Through the plexiglass I could see the horizon, the hills and valleys surrounding the high desert landscape of southern Washington, as well as the base and strip below. My body relaxed, and I took a breath.



The pilot's voice came over my headset again to let me know my exploration into zero-G adventures was a little more than he'd bargained for, so I pulled back up, sinking into my seat again as I brought us up a little short of where we were when we had started: 4,900 feet.

The pilot did not give me back the controls after that, but I didn't need them. It was hot, my mind racing alongside my heart. The adrenaline rush, the incredible view, brought an odd sense of peace. I nearly whined like an unsatisfied toddler when we made our descent back to the airstrip. I already missed the sensation of weightlessness, and seeing the world from a new perspective.

Despite the apprehension I had before boarding, I had caught the flying bug. I was already thinking about when I'd be able to take control again, soaring with the thermals.



Toxic Tabloid Culture Raised Me

SAVANNAH COTTINGHAM

FLAB ALERT!

(RED CIRCLE. ARROW. ZOOM.)

During the first decade of the 2000s, magazines trained girls like me how to look at women, and how to look at ourselves. The covers were ruthless: *Who Wore It Worst*, *Beach Body Fail*, stomachs circled that were flat by any reasonable measure. Women in the public eye were dragged for weights that, by today's standards, would barely register as bodies at all. Is your waist smaller than a piece of paper?
FROM HOT TO NOT

Slim girls were labeled the "big ones." A visible hip bone was success. A soft stomach was scandal.

TOO THIN? TOO FAT? YOU DECIDE!

This was the era of body shaming. Nicole Miller introduced the 00, and suddenly absence had a number. Reality bent. Girls with digits in their pants size were considered failures. I remember staring at photos of celebrities the media insisted were "huge," trying to see it. I never could. They had flat stomachs. Long legs. Narrow waists. But the headline told me otherwise, and I believed the headline. I learned early that truth was negotiable if a font was bold enough.

The constant shift forced women to push their bodies beyond their natural boundaries to meet subjective ideas of beauty. That disconnect lodged itself somewhere deep and became a voice I mistook for my own. At some point, I labeled



myself the DUFF: The Designated Ugly Fat Friend. I didn't need anyone to say it out loud. Culture had already done the math for me. Someone had to be the comparison point. Someone had to make the thin girls look thinner. Just as the brainy girl couldn't be pretty, the fat girl could never be anything but cute.

At home, the message echoed differently but landed the same.

I had three sisters, all skinny as twigs. My sister Katelyn used to suck in her stomach until her ribs protruded, then laugh like it was a party trick. I watched closely, weighed down by jealousy and envy; when I sucked in, nothing happened. My sister Sassion was five years older than me, yet when I secretly tried on her clothes while she wasn't home, I couldn't fit into them. My mother dressed me in outfits that hid my ten-year-old figure, as if the tabloids were outside the door, ready to red-circle my hips and call me brave for showing my body in public.

My mother carried on her own complicated negotiation with her body. Weight Watchers materials teetered on the counter. *The Biggest Loser* brayed in the background. Trends and fabrics cycled through her closet. She never seemed fully comfortable in her skin, yet she was magnetic. A seductress in motion. Desired, but never at ease. That contradiction confused me. I didn't yet know a woman could be desired and still disappear from herself.

When it came to me, she softened the truth with excuses. *She just hasn't lost her baby fat yet.* That yet kept me hopeful. Still, she made me do *Insanity* workout videos in the living room, sweating onto the carpet, and weighed me weekly. Five dollars if I lost five pounds. My body turned into a project. A gamble. An "after" photo waiting to happen.

After my parents divorced when I was ten, control took a different shape. My dad cooked dinners that contradicted the essence of health. Frozen bean burritos and oven-baked



french fries, then limited how much I could eat. One burrito only, even if there were leftovers. Even if I was twelve and hungry in a way that had nothing to do with feelings and everything to do with growth.

Sometimes I ate the second burrito anyway.

He'd pull me into the garage afterward, the air thick with oil and dust, and tell me he saw me. That eating my feelings wasn't the answer. As if I had language for feelings yet. As if hunger required therapy. I learned quickly that wanting was dangerous. That fullness was something to confess.

When I turned thirteen and started menstruating, the weight finally dropped right on schedule, like my body had been listening to everyone else. I wasn't skinny, though. My jeans weren't tiny. Compared to my friends, I was still the fat one. I wasn't the Monica wearing a fat suit in the Friends flashback episode, but I was the Kelly Clarkson—curvy that was scandalized on every teen tabloid circulating the halls of seventh grade. I worked out every day. Five hundred sit-ups every morning before school, counting a form of devotion. I didn't purge like some girls did. Throwing up burned my throat and left me feeling disgusted for hours afterward, but I believed discipline, in the form of daily sticky notes with workout tasks, could override biology. Why did my sisters get to be skinny and I overweight when we were cut from the same cloth?

When I got pregnant, I gained eighty pounds, and my body never returned to what it had been before, no matter how much I waited or worked out. Pregnancy justified weight. No more sucking in *Tina the Talking Tummy*, because pregnancy bellies were cute; socially acceptable. But I didn't bounce back like the articles said I would. My jeans jumped to double digits, and not the good kind. A size ten is a long way from a double zero, even though it's the American standard size. *America's Next Top Model* told me anything above a size two was plus-size.



The Devil Wears Prada told me, “Two became the new four, and zero became the new two.” And a size six? “The new fourteen.”

I was fat. Fifteen. A teen mom. Isolated from everyone, labels stacked until I could barely see myself beneath them.

I wore baggy shirts to hide my stomach, and the judgment felt constant. My father praised my sister’s thinness like it was a family achievement I’d somehow failed to unlock. At dinners, I learned to portion myself carefully. To leave food behind. To eat like someone who didn’t want to be noticed because there is always a resurgence in people’s obsession with thinness, and with what’s on the fat one’s plate. Never mind my sisters ate twice what I did and walked away unscathed.

I didn’t love my body. I didn’t even know how to dress it. Clothing was either camouflage or punishment. I cried in fitting rooms while the things I wanted refused to slide over my thighs, clung too tightly to my stomach, my arms. Nothing ever felt like mine.

I hated my body. I cataloged every fold, every dimple in my back, the weight of my arms. Toxic Tabloid Culture handed me a mirror before I had language and taught me how to flinch. After showers, I stood naked in front of my full-length reflection and cried, asking myself what I could do differently. I didn’t want perfection. I just wanted to be beautiful.

Life went on anyway. Marriage. More children. The years kept moving whether I approved of myself or not. My body did extraordinary things—it grew humans, fed them, kept them alive—and I treated it like a problem to be solved.

I learned how to disappear in photographs, angling myself sideways, folding my arms across my stomach, hugging myself smaller. I threw away the scale because it felt toxic, but the numbers followed me anyway. I avoided doctors’ offices like a plague, because women’s pain is negotiable, dismissible, and every complaint seemed to have the same cure.



Seizures? *You should lose weight.*

EXPERTS SAY: SHEDDING POUNDS COULD CHANGE EVERYTHING

Chronic migraines? *You should lose weight.*

BEFORE & AFTER: HER BIGGEST TRANSFORMATION YET

Chronic uterine pain? *Obviously, it would all resolve if you weren't fat.*

WHAT WENT WRONG?

I was twenty-two, trapped in a toxic marriage, ashamed of my body, living beside a man who told me I'd be more attractive if I were thinner. Never mind that he outweighed me. Never mind that I was already carrying the weight of survival. What was the point of living an entire life at war with myself?

I had confused endurance for virtue.

The shape of my body was not a measure of my worth. It did not dull my intelligence or drain my beauty no matter what doctors, magazines, or my husband insisted, I was beautiful. I carried a heart of gold and a hunger for the wild. I was empathetic, intuitive, drawn to homeopathic remedies and soft truths, utterly singular, impossible to replicate.

My breasts were full and heavy, teardrop-shaped because three babies had latched onto them and lived. My stomach was mapped in silver and red, stretched wide as a sky, marked by the passage of bodies that once called me home. I was a woman shaped by earth and stardust, magnificent in the way only originality can be.

Why should I despise the softness that clung to me when it had never defined me? How could I ask the world to love me, how could I demand beauty be seen, if I refused to offer it to myself first?

Finally, I decided I was done hating my body. Done waiting to earn comfort. Done postponing confidence until some imaginary future version of me arrived. I dressed how I wanted,



not because I was thin enough, but because confidence wasn't conditional.

I wasn't in denial about my size. Obsession with women's bodies never really left. Not from my family and not from the media. But with self-assurance came understanding: my body wasn't broken, it was specific. Hormone imbalance. Polycystic ovarian syndrome. Insulin resistance. My body didn't respond to restriction the way it was "supposed" to. I could barely eat and still didn't lose weight. The promise that effort equals outcome collapsed under science.

So instead of hiding, I let clothes speak. Crop tops. Form-fitting dresses. Fabric that told the truth. I felt most powerful wearing the things I'd been warned against, and others began to see.

That's when I started mirror work.

At first, it felt absurd standing in front of myself, meeting my own eyes, saying it out loud: *I love my body. I love myself.* My voice wavered. I didn't believe it yet. But belief wasn't the requirement. Repetition was.

I noticed how vicious my inner dialogue had become. How quickly I reduced myself to size and surface. The intrusive thoughts didn't disappear, but I learned to interrupt them. To answer back.

Mirror work wasn't about pretending I loved everything. It was about refusing to participate in my own disappearance.

I still don't love every photograph. People still judge. Some days the old noise gets loud. Women's bodies, like fashion, seem to follow trends. And so did my mindset. But loving yourself isn't silence. It's authority.

I began noticing things I'd never allowed myself to claim. How the brown of my eyes shimmered gold in the sun. How the side dimples came out in my smile when I'm truly happy.



The strength in my legs. How my hips accentuate my waist in a form fitting dress. I admired the curve of my body as fact. Not a flaw. Not worship.

Recognition.

I spent years trying to outrun the fat trend of the early 2000s without realizing that's exactly what it was: a trend. A cultural glitch dressed up as morality, discipline, and health. It convinced an entire generation of girls that normal bodies were wrong. I was the black sheep for a long time. Too soft. Too much. Now I understand the truth that took decades to reach me: my body was never the problem. It was evidence—of a life lived, of breath, of presence, of beauty.

And it is worthy of my love as every size and every shape.







HYBRID





Catching Your Breath

GRACE SCOTT

Hangers click in a hot breeze. The smell of cotton and laundry detergent mixes with the scent of roses and other wild things. The urge to laugh bubbles in my chest, the desire to dance as I hang up damp clothes. The wide porch, the peeling paint, the warm pavement under my feet, all remind me of Spain. Spider strings float across the sky as I look up through the clothesline. If I were light enough, I'd catch one and float through the air, following the currents like a boat on the water. Hot summer air fills my slowly expanding lungs, and my feet almost leave the ground. But then that laugh decides to add to the birdsong and whooshes all the air out. Damp clothes hide me like a secret: the funny kind of secret you want to tell someone. The air is cool between the sheets, and the ground looks inviting, covered with daisies. My basket is light now, full of clothespins. Carefully I step, bare feet over pavement, dodging a lazy bee and tickling the grass. The house is dark inside, the kind of dark that only exists when the sun is beaming outside. Wood panels creak under my feet, making me smile. The sun pools melt honey into the kitchen, turning the refrigerator alabaster and the tabletop into a golden coin. Dishes chuckle bubbles while I load them into their bath, and water whispers your stories into my ears. I repeat them again while I borrow shadows' feet, slipping into the sitting room like a needle through thread. Too much air expands this room's lungs. It seeps into the carpet and soaks into the walls, into the cracks and out the windows. Your air floats into the



sky and burrows into the garden, sprouting up Mexican daisies and sweet peas. Morphine drip and ChapStick. I place a kiss on your hand. Breathing your warmth through my lips, into my lungs. Pressure tightens into a sob, but releases as a laugh: a whoosh to mingle with your air. When I think of your life, I think of an intake of breath. The exhale; a mystery. A laugh. A sob. A song. An inappropriately timed comment. A breath to float in the breeze, as you tend to your flowers.



Night Chorus

JUDY YODER

I close my eyes for the night,
the metronome starts beating:
kreck-eck . . . kreck-eck . . . kreck-eck ¹
Worries of the day take flight.

Disturbed from my peaceful rest,
by a mournfully rich baritone duet:
hoo . . . HOO . . . hoo . . . HOO ²
Snuggle deeper in my warm nest.

Dawn chorus announces new creation,
soloists grandstanding in the quiet:
chirping . . . whistling . . . clicking ³
Heart bursting with joyful anticipation.

Spirit overjoyed with song I rouse
to be scolded by nature's alarmist:
chee chee chee chee chee ⁴
Back to the reality of my house.

1. The Pacific treefrog can be heard at any time of day, but large choruses are most common at sunset. In the spring breeding season, a “kreck-eck” shows their prowess and is intended to attract a mate; a “krrreck” is a warning to other males.

2. The barred owl is most active at night. Their rich baritone hooting may be courtship with a mate, marking their territory, or a call for their mate to switch places in the nest.



3. The Pacific wren, American robin, and Black-capped chickadee are the most vocal of the symphony at sunrise. The most robust songs are by the males hoping to attract a mate. However, it might be their enjoyment of their own song that carries farther in the quiet, calmer air of early morning.
4. The Douglas squirrel is very vocal and makes different sounds for defending their space: sounding the alarm, courtship, and defense; most common is the continuous chattering and chirping done out of excitement or annoyance.



Scars /skärs/ verb

KYRSTEN BOWDEN

1. The decorations of the human body or soul. Created by
Accident
Survival
or Choice

Bound to emotion, like kintsugi//understanding that damage becomes beauty.

2. Not foul or ugly but rather full of history.//Each one different
Size

Shape

& Journey.

Fresh or part of the past//they last & linger//holding laughter, stupidity, or sorrow.//They're there for every tomorrow, whether physical or mental//stabbed through seeping blood, or carved in bone, the heart remembers the piercing cold, the vorpal blade winning the throne.//The brain echoes the pain, in reflex, in fear, & in vain.//The unspoken pieces of the portrait matter//and DON'T let NOBODY *shatter* that image//Hell-// In fact//let *them* chatter.//Those scars, those marks//they've carried you up that Great Ladder.//Given you strength & passion//forged through pain turning into action, moments *etched* where healing took some *traction*,

Some progress

Some reaction

Some caress

Some adaptation

mapping out the lessons learned through trial & error.//They whisper where words *failed* & actions **prevailed**.//These marks, they **don't** ask for *permission* to stand out permanently upon the surface.//They form from collision & *friction*.//Skin holding memory in pigment & *tension*.//Truth pressed deep



intently//but not gently
Not pretty
Not quiet
Not defiant
Not clean
Certainly not obscene,
but elegant & *seen*://Proof you've endured this horrific scene
of bodies breaking, silence screaming, skin bleeding on tile,
thoughts dancing://Now glancing in the mirror, noticing
what *you* carry, embody,://tales written, not apology//survival
marked//without modesty,

Scars
The natural tattoos
of the body



What Do You Know about Sand Dollars?

JORDAN SHEERES

Of course, you know they're a fossil of sorts. You know they wash up at the beach. You know they are abundant and pretty, valueless things. You know how it feels turning over in your coat pocket, shedding sand and sea. Grab it if you have one handy, check the craft drawer, the flowerpots on the sill. See the sunburst? See the radial symmetry of the fossilized petaloid? Look closer. In the middle, a perfect specimen will have a five-point star cluster of perforations at the nexus of the petals. Five nostrils for live gas exchange. Now, of course you understand we're talking about a dead thing here, a rusted frame in the yard. But it used to crawl on millions of feet—look again at the petaloid, the constitute hatch-marks of the petals are scars from cilia. While alive, they slide over the sand, lean into the surf and catch nutrients like a net. They use cilia to pass food bits along to the mouth, easily identifiable by flipping the shell. You can learn the age of a sand dollar by counting the scale-patterned rings of magnetite blooming from the mouth. Mine was six years old when she died. I say *she* because you can reliably sex any sand dollar with this simple heuristic: if larger than four centimeters, it's female. Sand dollars only express sexual dimorphism through their size. Now take your sand dollar between both hands, hold her like a wafer, and break her in half. Let the doves



tumble into your palms. The doves were her teeth; they processed the sea. The ocean washed out her organs. Teeth are the only things left in the shell. A tooth is a seed, and a seed is a shield, the armor-shell of future growth. What helps us endure endures in us. Cup your hands, take the teeth back to the flowerpot, the craft-drawer, the seashore, and scatter your doves. Bury them in April, sleep in the sand, cycle the seasons and track through next year for the petaloid, sunburst.





CRITICAL
PERSPECTIVES

|



Five Peas in a Pod: The Brontë Family and the Plausibility of Neurodivergence

KIRSTEN ROHLA

The Brontë family is no less intriguing today than they were in the 1840s when it was discovered the “Bell Brothers” were actually three sisters, daughters of a clergyman in historic Yorkshire, England. The eldest sister, Charlotte Brontë, was the author of *Jane Eyre*, and Emily, the middle, the author of *Wuthering Heights*. Their fame has been plagued with the salacious gossip of outsiders ever since. They are at turns called quirky, eccentric, and painfully shy, or sometimes peculiar, controlling, moody, and domineering. Few authors will suggest that anything beyond an isolated personality trait or tragic backstory might be the cause. It does the family a disservice to acknowledge all their negative traits while, in the same breath, excusing them because of isolation, a stern father, and the loss of a mother. Being weird is not a character flaw, and behaviors that hinder daily living deserve recognition and assistance.

There is a common saying in medicine: “If you hear hooves, think horses, not zebras.” The funny thing about medicine, though, is that it must be zebras sometimes, and it is disingenuous to disregard the possibility when an entire family clearly struggles in similar ways. To that end, what if the entire Brontë family were neurodivergent? How would that change how their behaviors are interpreted?

“Neurodivergence” is a layman’s term. The DSM-5 equivalent is “general neurodevelopmental disorder (NDD),”



an umbrella which covers disorders such as autism and ADHD, both of which have a strong genetic component and a high rate of comorbidities. This means that there are no specific diagnostic criteria for neurodivergence itself. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), however, is so all-encompassing that using that criteria as a guideline ensures a holistic look at all parts of life when identifying neurodivergent symptoms.

Well-known are the “peculiarities” that set the Brontë family apart from their peers, many stemming from Patrick Brontë. An often-cited anecdote is his rigid adherence to a schedule, such as winding the clock at precisely the same time every night and keeping his extemporaneous sermons to exactly half an hour. He also worked and gave the children their lessons at exact times, perhaps not unusual given there were six children at one point and his wife Maria had died. However, this rigidity about time extended to all aspects of his life; he'd even leave functions early regardless of the occasion to be home for his evening routine.

While a father's influence on his children is often significant, it should not obscure the Brontë sisters' inherent natures and special interests. Charlotte critically analyzed artwork and spent hours on miniature drawings. Emily and Anne also worked toward perfecting their artistic skills. Emily also had an interest in the moors behind their house and reportedly knew every inch of their land. Anne spent much of her pocket money on sheet music and spent hours transcribing it; she also focused on religion and struggled for years ruminating over uncompromising Calvinist views of redemption in contrast to her own belief of salvation for all. The entire family were voracious readers and book collectors, an expensive habit for a family of modest means.

All three sisters would hyperfocus on their writing, to the point of sometimes neglecting their own health when working



on novels. For years they were known to pace around the kitchen table every evening, talking out ideas and storylines. Pacing is an important but under-analyzed activity. After a long day, it might have made more sense to have discussions seated at the table, but the Brontë sisters seemed to need movement to think, mimicking Patrick as he had paced back and forth decades earlier as he wrote poetry. Pacing may have also given their energy an outlet as they often had disagreements and defended plot points, such as whether *Jane Eyre* should be pretty or not (Emily and Anne thought yes, Charlotte, no).

Charlotte and Branwell also shared a tendency toward impulsive behavior. Branwell jumped between very different career tracks (portrait painter, tutor, and railway clerk), at one point changing jobs every year for four years, but more often he was without a job. The one time he thrived, unlike his sisters, was in a bustling work environment with lots of social and cultural stimulation. Notably, this was in his first clerkship, where he did well enough to earn a promotion and transfer, and was the only one he did not lose, although his promoted position only lasted about a year before he was dismissed. He was consistently dismissed from positions due to making poor and impulsive choices that affected his performance or reputation. In company, he was both effusive and aggressive, occasionally fighting, and Claire Harman suggests he used alcohol to relieve the same anxiety that his sisters felt in social situations. Charlotte can also be seen constantly changing her mind about her career, making snap judgments, and falling out with people over perceived slights. All but Anne could be considered hot-tempered.

Although the Brontë family struggled socially, parents Patrick and Maria had many friends early in their marriage. After Maria's death, Patrick seemed almost incapable of



making new friends or hosting. Visitors often referred to him as being oddly formal at home, and Ellen Nussey noted his sometimes-inappropriate conversation topics when she was a teen, sharing stories of “grim humor” that made her “shiver and shrink.” In the home, he retired for several hours in the evening, even after working alone in his study during the day, then emerged to conduct evening prayers followed by conversation before retiring again at precisely nine, regardless of guests, while the sisters were often up until midnight. This demonstrates not only how Patrick struggled without Maria as a buffer, but also his rigid nature and inflexibility as well as his need for significant time to decompress alone. As the patriarch, no one would question his right to solitude. Outside the home, he also tended to visit parishioners as needed rather than engaging in regular social calls, and there were complaints of friction between him and his curates due to his personality. Despite many others in his position traveling to visit family or vacation, he did not, and this is something of note in his daughters, as well.

Emily in particular is called homesick and unable to function away from home based on three negative experiences: school for a few months at fifteen, a teaching job for six months at nineteen, and another stint as a student/teacher for about eight months at twenty-three. From the former she was sent home due to illness, and from the latter two she elected to leave on her own before the agreed departure date. However, this was not a unique experience: all the siblings moved away for jobs and school and returned at least once before anticipated. Charlotte was also sent home from a job and Anne from school with similar illnesses to what Emily had suffered at fifteen, which was primarily emotional distress that was affecting each physically.

While there is no doubt homesickness did play a role in their struggles, it's important to consider all the factors: a



new environment and people, a strict schedule outside their norm, different food, societal expectations, and a lack of privacy or sufficient time away from others to recharge. In most situations, though, the girls had moments of success. As students, all did well academically, and Charlotte in particular made lifelong friends. That Charlotte pushed to be allowed to study in Brussels and later considered moving to Paris, and that Anne was willing to take a job far from home which she kept for five years, also suggests being away from home was less important than being away from a support system and schedule of their own choosing.

The roles of teacher and governess also added responsibilities and allowed even less free time, exacerbating their exhaustion and burnout. This suggests an inability to manage the stress, students, and executive function required of a teacher rather than simple shyness contributed to their work difficulties. It is quite common for undiagnosed autistic people, particularly women, to struggle more as they get older, with symptoms getting harder to manage as episodes of burnout become more frequent and sometimes cause permanent disability and skill regression. When Charlotte returned home, even from vacations if they were highly stimulating, she often needed to take days to quietly recuperate, sometimes in a dark room with no interaction. After her return from Brussels, she was unable to write for months. This cycle may have been due in part to the mental energy it takes to mask in public to conform to expected behaviors, as well as environmental overstimulation. Ruptures can be seen in the form of angry outbursts by Charlotte and Emily and the melancholy and physical distress in Charlotte and Anne the longer they maintained their façades.

It is a mistake, however, to think that neurodivergent people struggle with all social interactions. The sisters and



even Branwell were quite capable of making and maintaining friendships. Tensions arose most often in crowded, unfamiliar settings where the cognitive load of social navigation became overwhelming. Emily may well have frozen when asked unexpected questions or been expected to engage in idle chitchat, in addition to the likelihood rooms were crowded and warm with lots of activity that made it difficult to focus on the conversation. She would also, of course, be expected to sit still. After her sisters' deaths, when Charlotte spent more time in London meeting people, reports of Charlotte's own behavior are wildly different. She is at times charming and cold, withdrawn and animated, shy and confident. Additionally, many of the times she or her sisters are accused of poor social interaction are in larger evening gatherings meeting new people, presumably after full days of either teaching or excursions.

Charlotte herself wrote about how tiring it was to be around people and crowds, something Anne echoes in her own novels. However, in small groups or one-on-one, conversation was much less daunting. When the discussion shifted from the superficial to topics of interest, both Charlotte and Emily are described as enthusiastic conversationalists. Arguably, Charlotte was once so engaging that a male guest who had only visited the home once to return several days later to ask her to marry him. She refused and was flabbergasted by his interest. Emily came alive outside, unsurprising considering the comfort she took from nature, and possibly because walks happen side-by-side, not facing another with the expectation of eye contact.

Logically, neurodivergence does not exist in a vacuum, and situational context makes a significant difference in how people react in activities that may appear the same. For example, "social interaction" covers both tea with friends and an aristocratic dinner as the guest of honor in mixed company. The possibility the Brontë family individually had one or overlapping conditions explains many of their behaviors and



interactions, particularly the contradictory reports. Looking at their lives and behaviors holistically rather than in isolation allows us to honor their strengths and avoid demonizing their weaknesses. People cannot be summed up in one-or-two-character traits, and the Brontë family deserves a more comprehensive reading.

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Up-Raising

SAVANNAH COTTINGHAM

Maya Jewell Zeller's *Raised by Ferns* arrives like a memoir-in-essays you didn't quite know you needed until you find its language settling into your own awareness—the way a fern frond unravels, unfurling slowly, persistently, insistently. In this lyric, hybrid work, *Jewell Zeller* refuses tidy narrative arcs. There is no dramatic redemption narrative with a plot you can map onto a familiar grid. What *Raised by Ferns* does, beautifully and provocatively, is linger in the spaces between. It navigates poverty and security, wildness and domesticity, past selves and present ones in ways that feel lived, messy, thoughtful, and, at moments, deeply surprising.

The memoir begins with a “privilege button,” a garage door opener that lifts a climate-controlled life into view at the press of a finger. Jewell Zeller lingers on this small object, treating it almost like a philosophical device—an emblem of access so ordinary that most people never think twice about it. “Each press,” she writes, is “both a convenience and a confession.” The garage door rises smoothly, revealing not only the interior of a home but the invisible infrastructure that makes such ease possible: stability, property, insulation from weather and uncertainty. The button becomes a quiet ritual of awareness. It reminds Jewell Zeller that the life she now occupies—homeowner, professor, parent—is structured by systems that once felt far beyond reach. Born to itinerant, countercultural parents in a Pacific Northwest gas station, Jewell Zeller grew up in a world where housing



was temporary, food unpredictable, and the line between freedom and instability difficult to see. Poverty and wildness were daily conditions; improvisation was a survival skill. The privilege button, then, is more than a metaphor for class mobility. It marks the uneasy moment where past and present meet: the child who once lived outside the walls and the adult who now presses a button to protect them.

This opening gambit sets the tone for the rest of the memoir: what looks like ordinary technology or domestic infrastructure is always, upon inspection, entangled with social systems that shape our lives in profound ways. In Jewell Zeller's world, existence isn't separated into neat boxes—childhood and adulthood, roughness and stability, nature and culture—but instead flows between them in layered, interdependent ways.

“Raised by ferns,” she writes, is more than a metaphor; it is a mode of perception, a way of understanding the world and the self that refuses borders.” In describing her early years, Jewell Zeller refuses the comfort of a neat story. There is no single “before” and “after,” no easy arc from deprivation to success. Instead, the memoir stitches together essays, fragments, observations, and interrogations that evoke the experience of living across thresholds rather than beyond them.

One of the most striking things about this memoir is its refusal to settle. It leans into hybridity, moving between modes without ever losing the thread of its voice. Scientific facts about ecosystems and invasive species sit beside personal memories of leaking rental houses, mobile libraries, and riverside wanderings. A chapter might move from the ecology of blackberries and tide pools to the unnoticed ways bureaucracies exert force on daily life—minimum square-footage requirements, HOA rules about fences and chickens, and the coded language of “curb appeal.” These details, Jewell Zeller suggests, don't just describe a life; they constitute it.



In essays like “Ruin Porn” and “He Worked as an Electrician. He Enjoyed Television. (His Obituary Was Plain.)” Jewell Zeller demonstrates the formal range that defines *Raised by Ferns*. In “Ruin Porn,” she pairs close observation—poison hemlock, “lovely, straight, and green”—with ecological facts, noting its toxicity even to snails. In the latter essay, the essay opens in stark fragments before expanding into scenes of childhood, family history, and the material realities of mining, eventually arriving at the intimate vulnerabilities of caregiving and early motherhood. Across these pieces, Jewell Zeller moves fluidly between lyrical descriptions, scientific observations, and personal narrative without collapsing them into a single mode. Instead, each remains distinct, accruing meaning through juxtaposition. The result is a work in which beauty, danger, knowledge, and vulnerability are held in productive tension, underscoring the memoir’s hybridity as both form and method.

Jewell Zeller’s use of language itself is part of the memoir’s quiet claim on our attention. Her sentences are precise without being cold, curious without being sentimental. She situates her own class passage not as escape but as tension: “My whole adult life, I’ve passed as middle class, blending in (if not fitting in), keeping a low profile about my roots, because I know what happens when people think they understand you—you surrender authority.” In this one line, the memoir locates both the appeal and the cost of belonging.

Other pieces of *Raised by Ferns* are wrenching because they press against the very idea of narrative coherence. Jewell Zeller recounts her birth amidst the 1970s gas shortage; her mother wading into the Pacific Ocean during labor; her father returning from Guatemala with wool blankets used to pay midwives and then admits that dates wobble and conditions contradict memory. “The moon may not have been full after all.” Rather than undermining the story, this admission enlarges it. She shows us that origin stories are necessary



and sustaining, but also unreliable. In doing so, Jewell Zeller lets the seams show, inviting readers to examine not just what we remember, but how we remember and why.

That kind of self-interrogation is part of what makes this book compelling. Jewell Zeller does not flinch from the contradictions of her own life: the way wildness shaped her and yet did not shield her from harm; the way education opened doors and yet created distance; the way motherhood grounds her and yet reveals how little control one ever truly has. These are not rhetorical dilemmas but embodied ones.

One of the more memorable threads in the memoir is Jewell Zeller's relationship with literacy and libraries. In several essays, she revisits bookmobiles and library stacks as sanctuary spaces that met her family wherever they landed and offered both refuge and permission. "Literacy is survival," Jewell Zeller writes, insisting that reading and writing are not merely modes of reflection but forms of living in the world.

Yet even as she celebrates language and literature, Jewell Zeller is keenly aware of the politics of representation. Teaching texts like *Nickel and Dimed*, she reflects on who gets to narrate poverty and under what conditions; how narrative authority is shaped by class, race, and institutional legitimacy. The memoir does not offer easy answers. Instead, it positions itself within these tensions, acknowledging that writing about poverty carries power—and risk.

What makes *Raised by Ferns* especially resonant is how it marries the personal with the ecological, the small with the systemic. Jewell Zeller's childhood landscapes (forests, rivers, rainforests, floodplains) are not mere backdrops. They are teachers that shape her ethics, her perceptual habits, and her sense of belonging. She learned how to read subtle signs in the natural world long before she learned to read institutions. This intersection of natural and social ecologies is where the memoir finds its most urgent, articulate voice.



And yet for all its complexity and depth, *Raised by Ferns* remains deeply human, attentive to the everyday moments that make a life. Jewell Zeller writes about her children with tenderness and unease, aware of how differently they experience the world than she did. “How do you teach gratitude without trauma?” she asks. “How do you cultivate resilience without deprivation?” These questions, unanswerable in any definitive way, are what the book returns to again and again.

In a literary climate crowded with memoirs that traffic in spectacle and closure, *Raised by Ferns* is quieter but stronger for it. There is no voyeuristic lingering on suffering, no neat redemption waiting at the end. Instead, the book offers something rarer: a sustained meditation on what it means to live amid contradiction, to carry multiple class identities at once, and to inhabit the spaces between—not as transitional points, but as places from which to think.

Raised by Ferns is a book you finish, and then it quietly continues in a kind of slow release, like spores across a forest floor, asking you to reconsider how you see yourself, your world, and the roots from which you have grown.



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