

Verdant

WONDERS

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VERDANT WONDERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SPRING

The Urban Beaver Speaks
Nature Tells of
 Deep Lock Quarry*
On Lock 28*
One World
The Robin
1973

Alan Ambrisco
Theresa Göttl Brightman

Theresa Göttl Brightman
Debbi Bollman
Debbi Bollman
Becca Zak

SUMMER

Crooked Cuyahoga*
The Heron
A Simple Purple Flower
Frogs in a Jar
Barn Bones
Milkweed
A Change of Pace
Lessons
What Man Has Not
 Done, Cannot Do
Summer
An Ode to Moss

Alan Ambrisco
Elise Ambrisco
Steve Brightman
Jeremy Brown
Janice Bury
Janice Bury
Caleb Edmondson
Lauren Griffin
Sean Hudson

Bobbi Krannich
David Roberts

AUTUMN

The Winding Hill
This is 35

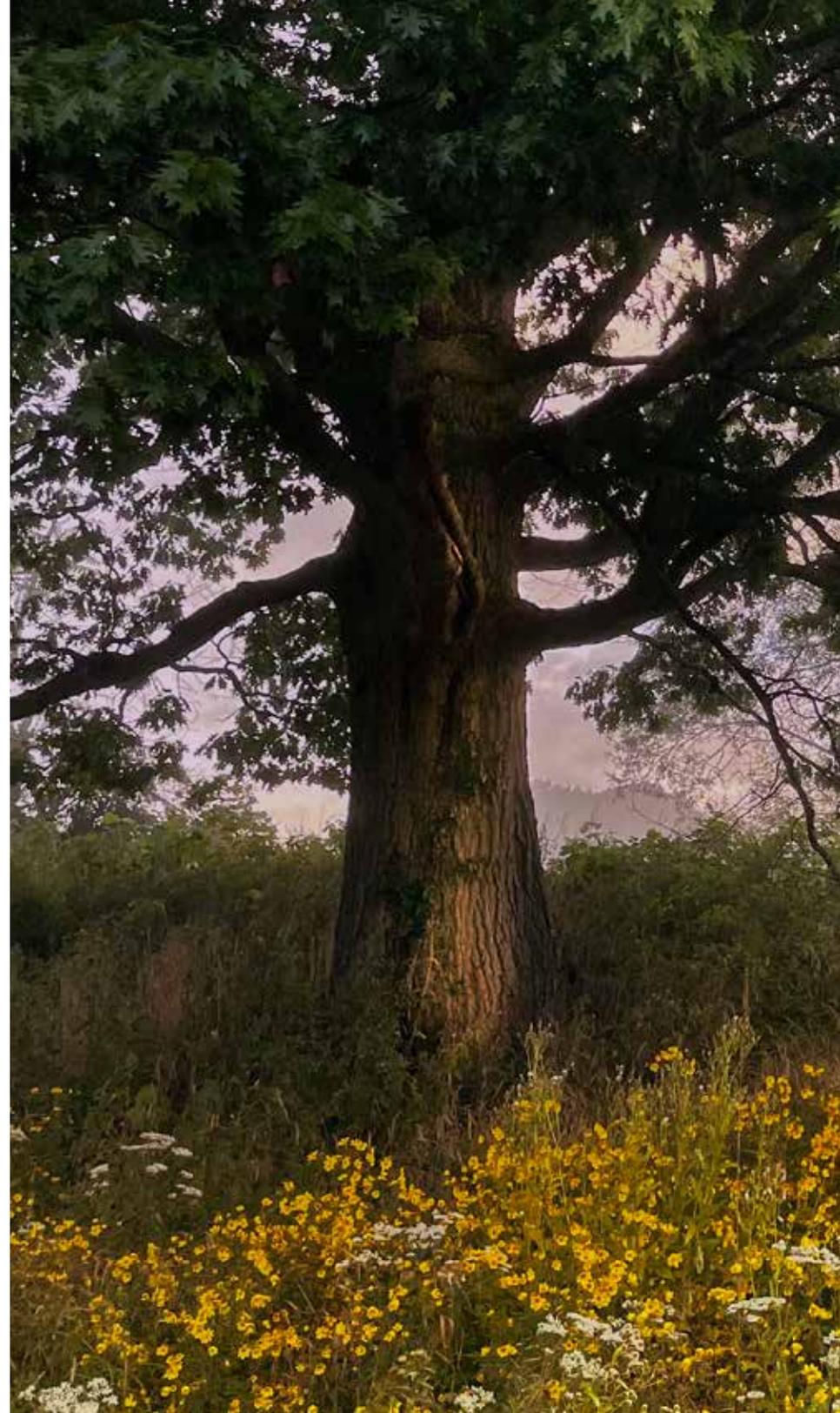
Caleb Edmondson
Becca Zak

WINTER

The Hope of Spring
A Door in the Forest

Debbi Bollman
Anna Rogalski

* *Indicates previously published work*





Spring





THE URBAN BEAVER SPEAKS

Alan Ambrisco

In the long dark I begin to build,
branches held between orange teeth,
mud tucked between chin and chest,
until the whole heaped up mound
stops up the cistern on the city's edge
and floodwaters fill the road, asphalt
and blacktop giving way to dark water.

When day dawns I climb the dam
and look up at lofty lodges,
tall buildings in the brooding sky,
iron-gray steel speckled with castoff
colors flaking to orange and brown.
There's no quiet here as people pass
carcasses of machines and skeletal
frames from rubber factories,
but there's piled beauty still in red brick
and I see history lingering in the light,
palimpsests of piebald pasts,
the pull of place for those with deep roots.

For architects with eyes to see
there's something yet to build on
between hard steel and cracked cement.
I left lily pads, songbirds and green algae
to come here, finding hard-culled hope
in makers like me who know broken glass
shimmers at dawn like a songbird's
iridescence. When cool evening comes,
we know there's time and world enough
for all colors, even these, to fade to green.



NATURE TELLS OF DEEP LOCK QUARRY

Theresa Göttl Brightman

Previously published in Summit Artspace

This is where they cut me,
as all children cut their mothers.
Ask any mother. Ask your own mother. She will tell you.
Whether it is a deliberate,
stone-sharpened disobedience,
or an accidental, bounding, glittering ignorance,
sin always begins with a cut.

Prideful men of gold and grain,
tiny men with tiny minds, an acorn cap
so stuffed with their own broken creations
they cannot recall or comprehend
that a world could build Herself.
When they stopped seeking me,
they only betrayed themselves.
Shunning what gives and sustains life
builds fortresses that do not live.

So they cut me to build cities of men and mills of men,
cut from me just as they cut from their own mothers,
took from me as they took from their own wives,
and from what they took and cut
built cities for their sons where their daughters could serve.

I do not serve men.

Sisters, take heart. Look to me.
Where my tree roots were ripped from soil,
I am now a grove of buckeye trees.
Where my soil was dried and pounded for roads and mule trails,
now rosepink blooms afresh where frogs and toads peep lullabies.
Where my air was filled with the sounds of metal against rock
metal against rock metal against rock,
now warblers sing their arias.

I delight in the warblers.
They sing of the trees.
They sing of the sky and the rain and
the sun and the cloud and the snow.
They sing of their fledglings,
and they sing of their mates.
They sing that they live their lives.
And when they sing,
they sing to praise their Mother.



ON LOCK 28

Theresa Göttl Brightman

Previously published in Summit Artspace

She was here first.

Before she birthed our ancestors' ancestors,
before any language-bearing creature
tried to control her by calling her
the first of thousands of names:
Ocean, River, Rain, Current.
When the Earth was a spinning hot slurry of iron,
she was here, in a rock of ice.
She formed sky and clouds,
built atmosphere, originated
the cycle of rain and cloud, rain and cloud.
She was here to catch carbon bits and flakes,
snap them together, and give them a place to float around
until lightning struck, creating something new, again.
She brought purpose with the animation of a single cell,
and she made another and another and another.

We made the mistake of trying to bend her to our will.
We called her Cistern, Aqueduct, Canal.
We forced her, an affront to her essential character,
until she rebelled, until we called her
Storm, Flood, Hurricane, Tsunami.

Now we must ask if there is Water in our bellies.
Not an all consuming fire, but Water.
Water that gives life and takes it away.
Water that runs and stands
and flows and falls. Water that adapts,
diverts, and carves with persistence.
We must find Water in our souls,
Water in our hands, Water under our feet.
It is our job to unmake our sins, to free her, restore her,
return her to her purpose
of creating a world where we can live.



ONE WORLD

Debbi Bollman

A different look, a different tongue, a different way of life
Though separated by these traits, all striving to survive
One breath, one blood, all come from the same dust
We share the sun, the trees, the air, and in the earth, we trust
Our brother bear, our sister swan share in this struggle too
Our father wolf and mother mare are no strangers to the truth
That if we carry on in blindness, squandering our time
We leave behind a starving world, our gifts will never shine
Take a look at those around, the people, plants and creatures
And realize we all are one and change our self-demeanor



THE ROBIN

Debbi Bollman

First to rise at break of dawn
And sing his happy song
He's perched high in the treetop
His voice urging me along
The cool, brisk air delights him
As the darkness slowly fades
The hopeful rise of daylight
Brings us both out of the shade
Our time together always short
As both head off to toil
He to scout for daily food
And me to work for spoil
At close of day, we come again
To once more be together
His melody will never cease
To sooth my ears with pleasure
He is first to rise and last to sleep
The longest watch has he
My song guide as I walk along
He's happy just to be



1973

Becca Zak

One species

One narrow focus

One day past 42

The eastern towhee sings in the spring forest

A fly agaric's competing rouge and cream warn the forest of its poisonous nature

The red fox's sensitive ears target a lone vole searching for food beneath the former autumn's leaves

A stunning pounce seals the rodent's fate

The fox lives awhile, later passing on

Fur and innards become soil

Bones fill other rodents' mouths, ensuring teeth stay functional

The nutrient-rich biomass produced fuels the native seed

Conjuring energy to spur germination

Winter stratification

Scarification in the sandy loam

A sprout

Peppered sunlight and sprinkled rain unite for adequate growing conditions

Roots penetrate

Leaves stretch out their arms toward the sky

Lepidoptera and Hymenoptera feast on nectar

The martins power themselves with insect bodies

Wonder and awe settle on the layman's visage

Encouragement to care, to fall in love, to be moved toward action, toward saving life as we know it

Now back to this "life" thing

Fallible men write judgements

Shaping the landscape for which only menstruating people must navigate



Summer



CROOKED CUYAHOGA

Alan Ambrisco

Previously published in Savor

Long before the river burned in 1969 like a hippie protesting petroleum and a legacy of pollution, those crooked turns corkscrewed through Ohio woods where men named Wagmong and Stigwamash hefted canoes on bare shoulders to the portage, never dreaming of mills, mules pulling canal boats, or well-dressed passengers stopping to eat johnnycakes.

We too hear in this river a sound echoing even beyond its hundred miles, even to the hemlocks, oak, and beech shouldering their way into vacant space left by clear-cutting, even to the beaver marsh and the rusted-out autos lying unseen beneath it, a murmur of glacial debris carving valleys now reclaimed by river otters and great blue herons, passing by old locks, reminding us of times when oatmeal and rubber made Akron great.

Some days it clatters like a clarion call along stone-hard ledges. Some days its soft susurrus lulls us into thoughts of self-reliance, cyclical rhythms, and living in tune with the falling of leaves, the slow growth of moss, or the legacy of fire. No matter. Still,

the river runs through lives and landscapes, changing each without pause or purpose, ploughing through remainders of grindstones and deep locks, down to the greater basins, salt beds, and distant falls, springing back after each cycle, each new compression, bearing always its long history in crooked coils.



THE HERON

Elise Ambrisco

It stood quietly,
motionless
on a log hovering
above the water's brim,
silently perched,
waiting
for its dinner.

I wonder now
how it came to be there
in this link of the towpath
with factories visible
through a thin line of trees.

We sat mesmerized,
hypnotized,
slowly eating and drinking
so as not to disturb
the heron.

Suddenly, it plunged its beak
into the water,
as if it were a silver dart,
and came up with its prey,
gobbling it up
between its jaws.

I also wonder
how I came to be there
among rushes and smoke,
stars and streetlights,
at this miraculous moment,
watching the heron
gulp down its dinner.





A SIMPLE PURPLE FLOWER

Steve Brightman

There's a conventional wisdom out there that says there are only three real answers to a prayer: "yes," "not yet," and "I have other plans in mind for you." And I was never much of a religious man, but sometimes it's not worth the time or energy to argue with convention.

YES

Firestone Metro Park, Redwing Trail

It was a few years ago that we got the official diagnosis. My mother had Alzheimer's. She was still pretty lucid and still pretty mobile when the test results came back. One of the things her neurologist said would help delay the inevitable was staying physically active.

This was the last autumn in the before times. The last autumn before Covid. Nobody knew what was coming. This is news to nobody, but it was hard to stay active that year. It was hard to do much of anything, but staying active seemed like an especially tall order. Then, eventually, summer subsided, and autumn began. The greens became reds and the greens became oranges and the greens became golds.

A number of my friends have whispered to me, at one time or another, about the small birds that will alight upon your fingers if you fill your hands with seed at the bridge in Firestone Metro Park where the Redwing Trail and the Willow Trail diverge. Needless to say, after surviving the summer of isolation, my already healthy sense of skepticism kicked into another gear.

But the trails in the Summit Metro Parks that were rated easy seemed like a great way to keep my mom as active as we could. So we went and walked, not knowing what to expect. We did not expect (but secretly hoped) the small birds would show. We did not expect so many left turns. We did not expect the Tuscarawas River to be that luscious and shaded. When a chickadee landed on my mother's outstretched and shaking hand, we knew we would be back. And we came back five times (only twice more being successful with the songbirds) until the 1.1-mile trail was simply too long for mom to make in one trip.

NOT YET

Liberty Park, Bluebird Trail

Liberty Park is certainly farther from West Akron than Firestone. It is even mildly difficult to grasp that both parks are in the same county. But Bluebird Trail is shorter by half and easier to take our time and stroll. By this time, Mom moved in with us. She had been living with my brother and his wife (and their three dogs). They both work long days and they had grown very uncomfortable leaving her unattended in the house for the 8-10 hours a day they were gone.

Mom was in mental decline, her eyesight had gotten poorer, and her steps were more unsteady than steady. So, we had mom move in with us until we could no longer provide the care she needed. This gave us a chance to really see how much her attempts at mobility took out of her. Her unsteady footfalls weren't incapacitating, but they required patience.

We looked for a shorter trail. We found a couple different options, but Bluebird Trail seemed like the best choice. The extra time in the car to get to the park was worth it. The trail was also all left turns, but it was soft grass and meadow flowers. She was unable to tell (or remember) the difference between the two parks but enjoyed being in the car and staring out the window. It was as close to a win-win scenario as Alzheimer's lets you have.

I HAVE OTHER PLANS IN MIND FOR YOU

F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm, Rock & Herb Garden

As too many families know, Alzheimer's only ends one way. The only thing that varies is time and severity. Mom was barely mobile and unable to go up or down stairs anymore. She needed constant care, which we could no longer provide. We found a facility that specialized in patients who have reached the state she was in. She still had some of her vocabulary, a good portion of her faculties, and could walk a few hundred feet at a time without completely exhausting herself. She could walk from one end of her wing to the other, so we did that when we could.

When we admitted her, we knew that she was not going to get to see much more of nature and trails were obviously out of the question, but we were allowed to leave the facility and we looked for some sort of solution. We had fallen in love with the Nature Realm, having walked the trails for Fall Hiking Spree (our third successful spree, by this point)

During our last visit there, as we were walking ourselves to the car, we noticed a small botanical garden by the parking lot. It was paved with bricks, it was mostly level, it was tiny enough to not exhaust anyone, and it was beautiful. The herbs and flowers and tiny wildlife were as breathtaking as any of the views in any of the parks (yes, including the Oxbow Overlook). It was perfect.

The last views of nature that my mother had were in that small botanical garden. She was mostly non-verbal and mostly immobile, but if I walked real slow and gave her my elbow to hold onto, she could get from point A to point B. Or in this case, from the parking lot to the garden. So that's what we did. She hung on to me the best her withering hands would let her and I walked slower than I knew I even could. And we stopped a lot.

The big, wooden Adirondack chairs and benches were spaced so perfectly that it felt like the park had consulted with us personally to ensure mom would not overwork herself. Every plant we saw was a new frontier. Every frog chirp and gurgle seemed to be the first sounds she ever heard. Seeing her sense of wonder with this was overwhelming. Seeing her see a simple purple flower, seeing her struggle for the word "purple" and how that flower still stopped her in her tracks, so she could point at it for her oldest son was the biggest joy and the biggest heartbreak I've ever known.



FROGS IN A JAR

Jeremy Brown

frogs in a jar
with no holes for air
clumsily collected
and left upon the stair

caught by tiny hands
as they hopped along the creek
displayed in admiration
but they didn't last a week

how was one to know
that the frogs needed to breathe
no one teaches children
anything about frog needs

how could one small child
be so accidentally cruel
a lesson learned the hard way
about nature's hardest rule

and I know one day my judgement
by the heavenly frog court
may not quite be so forgiving
of the ways that I fell short

so, please, forgive me, frogs
for I knew not what I did
find it in your heart to save
a grown up frogging kid

BARN BONES

Janice Bury

The crumble of wood
And rusted hinges
Leave barn doors hanging askew.
Peeled red paint
A dermis, bleached and raw,
Angry, blistered sunburn
Needing tending.
The yearly march of
Horse drawn wagons,
Laden with hay
And tractors in from the fields,
Weaken ancient, oak floorboards
Yet steadfast and true.
From the rafters
Creaks and groans
An apparition in overalls
Rising from a rickety kitchen chair
Weary from a day of toil.
The smell of horse manure
And rotted straw
Lingers adding sweetness
At end of day.
In netherworld of fading light,
Ears strain for
The soft twitter-warble
Of the barn swallows
Preparing to lay their eggs.



MILKWEED

Janice Bury

I drew milkweed leaves
With a ball point pen
Under the bright early morning sun.
Gathered with others at the park
For the simple pleasure
Of studying and drawing leaves.
A little girl looked up at me,
“You can sit with me,” she said.
So, I sat, cross-legged
On a purple yoga mat
Beside my new friend.
Gray hair
Next to long brown locks,
Conspirators, we drew.
We drew pink and purple flowers
With very tiny leaves.
She told me she was
Going into 6th grade
She helps kids at the library
With their reading
She wants to be a teacher
When she grows up.
Her father, standing nearby, smiled.
It felt sacred.
I drew leaves, all different kinds.
Greens and yellows splattered
In a kaleidoscope of dappled light.
If I held my breath
Maybe nothing would change

Or,
Maybe everything would change.
I looked around, thinking,
“How lucky I am
To sit in the sun and draw.”
I returned to my milkweed leaves
And drew,
Strong, sturdy stalks
Graceful deep green leaves,
Delicate veins carrying water,
Nourishment and secrets
From roots deep in the soil.
A leaf. Brief. Temporary.
An outward explication
Of life’s vital interconnectedness.
It made me think
About my brother’s heart.
A heart stopped for five hours,
Like suspended animation,
So a surgeon could repair
Blocked arteries.
I wondered...
Are you still alive at that moment?
Where does life go
If the heart stops beating?
Is it caught in a web
Of implicit emotion
That only a soul can recapture?
Light as gratitude, sneaking up

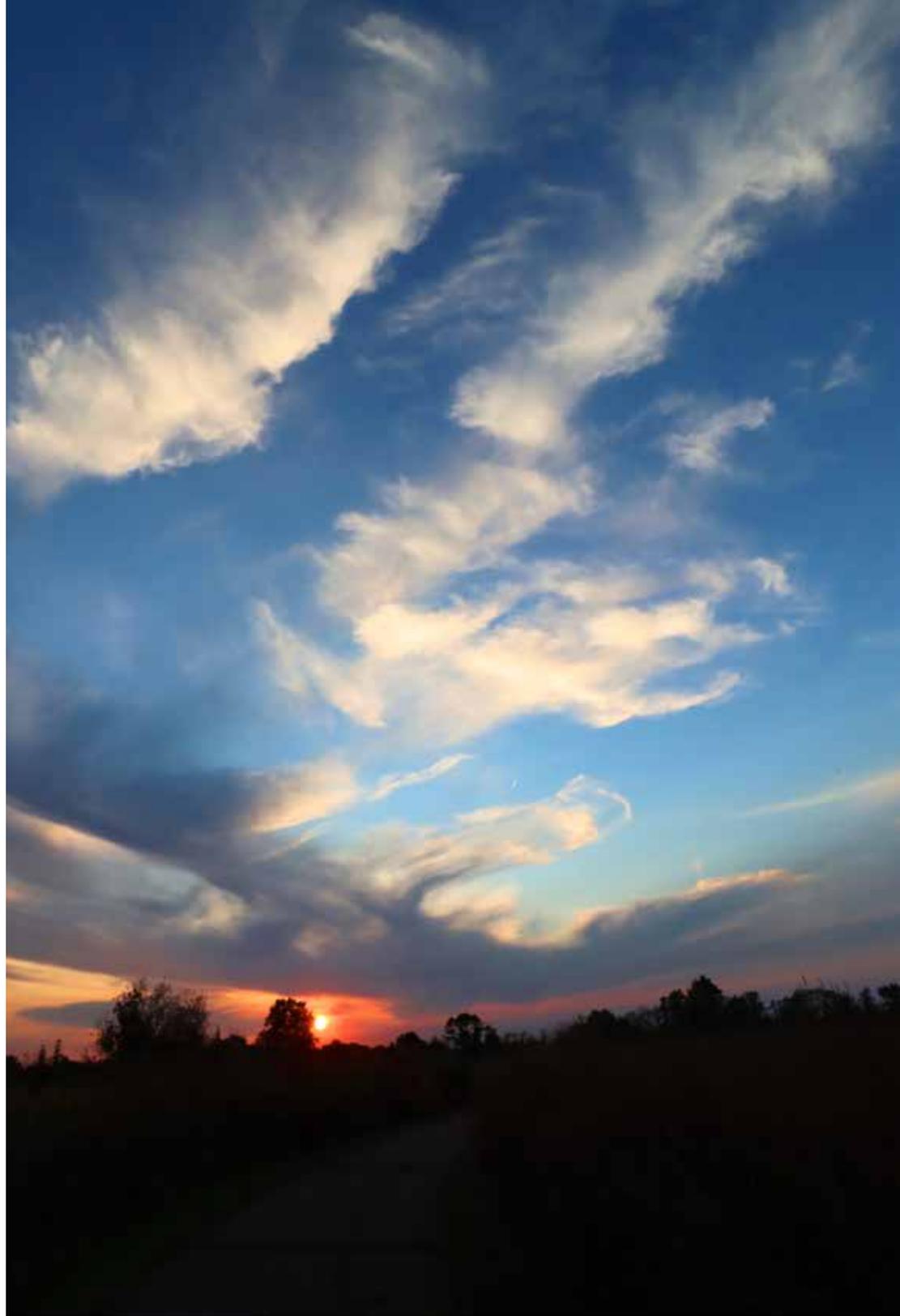
Like butterflies
Attracted to milkweed
Or love that penetrates
And heals a broken heart.
Awakened in the morning,
Warmed by the morning sun,
Drawing leaves.
My brother’s heart is fixed.
He is still here.
This is
What is
Supposed to be.



A CHANGE OF PACE

Caleb Edmondson

My mother once told me
about how she used to tape
pieces of paper to the sides
of her bedroom window.
She said the wind roared
like leaves as it rustled
across her legs, her hair,
that it made dreams something
she could feel. She told me
about dew-slick acorns,
how she dipped two toes
into a creek and let a crayfish
pinch her skin. She told me that
on those August nights, the bullfrogs
started singing again, that the smoke
from the neighbor's bonfire
tasted like a kiss of gardenia
in the morning after bitter coffee.
One evening, she became a chickadee
and met a grasshopper with big eyes
like her father's, a creature
who had little to say except,
when you need me, I will be there.
I will be there—and so will
the leaves, the windows, a room
where you can be still.
I'll be the sun bending low,
a splash of heat against your back
as those wings take you somewhere high.





LESSONS

Lauren Griffin

Meeting Nature where she's at to begin our lesson.

Here is where I learned to *love* again.

To *play* again.

Here is where they know and love me.

I am talking about the trees, of course.

Nature's greatest teachers.

Strong, loyal, unwavering.

Maybe someday they'll know my name.

I sit at the base of Tree looking up at their branches.

Wind starts our lesson.

Wind intertwines herself between the branches and leaves and twirls around the trunk of Tree.

Wind takes some leaves and branches with her as I watch them fall to the ground.

I thank Tree and Wind for teaching me to let go of things that do not serve me.

Can't you see their magic?

If you look close enough there is a whole world that Tree supports.

Squirrels, Birds, Bugs, Grubs.

Tree *is* their sanctuary.

Tree is old and wise.

They have seen so much and yet here they stand.

Still strong, still loyal, still.

How lucky we are to learn from these ancient beings, divine beings.

Stop

Slow down

Listen

Tell them *your* name

Maybe someday they will tell *you* theirs.



WHAT MAN HAS NOT DONE, CANNOT DO

Sean Hudson

Often, I awake on the weekend with the pull
to get outside, to get into nature
to take my thoughts, my perceptions and cull
mutations and distortions, to rightly recall.

Then, it's jackets, water bottles, boots, and "Kids, let's go!"
into the van, buckle up, and we're off
to see, to hear, to feel, to believe, to know
what man has not done, cannot do.

He may fly at 30,000 feet through Cleveland's cloud cover,
but he can't duplicate a chickadee's delicate wing flutter
or even the line of ducklings following their mother.
"Look at the birds, Children," I say, and we know.

He may cruise through the roughest of seas on exotic vacations,
but the smallest fish that flashes by in the stream at our feet
or the turtle sunning on a log is beyond his calculations.
"Look in the water, Children," I say, and we know.

He may build towers that scrape the sky and amaze the eye,
but he cannot even pretend to make anything like
the sandstone ledges that form a cave three stories high.
"Look at the rocks, Children," I say, and we know.

He may write his own headlines, shouting out his latest digital charms,
but he can only hope to mimic on a green screen
the slithering snake, the darting deer, the caching squirrel's busy arms.
"Look at the woodland creatures, Children," I say, and we know.

He may drive his car fast and far by day and by night,
but he can't keep it going season upon season, decade after decade,
growing like the maples, the oaks, the pines to great height.
"Look at the trees, Children," I say, and we know.

Still, we always return to the city, to our home,
park the van, remove boots, eat a snack, move on with the day,
pushed by the lights, furnace, washing machine, phone
to forget, to ignore, to doubt what man has not done, cannot do.

So, we will go out together again on another weekend,
maybe to a white waterfall or to see the horizon 'cross a large lake,
seeking to restore right-thinking, to reform again, to defend
the truth, what's actual: the humility of man.



SUMMER

Bobbi Krannich

Can you hear the gentle flip flip of the sheets drying on the line
When the breeze winds its way through them?

Grandma hung these to dry where the bright sunshine
Will capture the fragrance of summer for us to snuggle into after a long day.

Listen to the buzzing of the bees in the garden spreading their gold dust amongst
The flowers and tomatoes and beans that bear fruit for our nourishment.

Grandpa holds our hand as we enter the garden in search of a special treat
Well-honed pocket knife in the other hand and a shaker of salt tucked in a back pocket.

Sweet ripe tomatoes beckon as we choose just the right one to be plucked from the vine
To be burst with a swipe of the blade exposing the sweet juicy interior to accept just the slightest shake of salt.

Vines heavy with long green beans wind their way throughout the rows of corn stalks
Of warm silken tasseled ears so sweet they are enjoyed standing in the garden.

These are summer days in our memory where time only existed to be spent in payment of another season to come
That promised cooler breezes and a sort of death to those things we enjoyed then.

AN ODE TO MOSS

David Roberts

What is a thunderstorm without a clear sky to interrupt?

What is a shadowy forest without bright unbridled sunshine to shade out?

What is a stream filled with moss-strewn rocks without a wide-mouthed river with nothing but water to compare to?

Nature is alive in its contrasts. Without one, another slightly loses its luster.

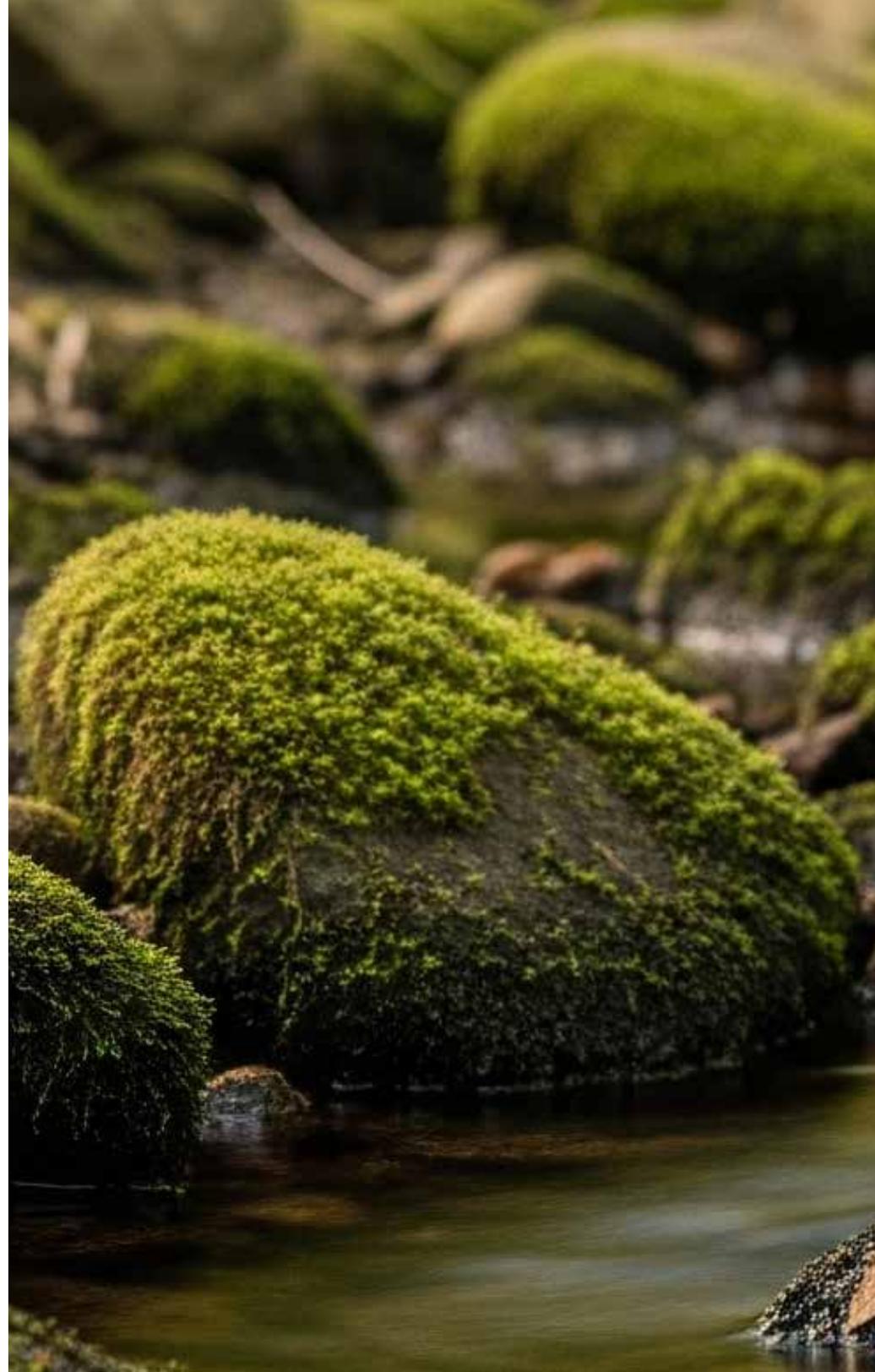
It is in these contrasts that perhaps we most find life.

A brazen adventure to find a hidden waterfall in the heat of summer.

Or perhaps the whimsy in which you cross a creek on mossy rocks, daring yourself not to get wet.

My favorite might be finding those spring flowers sprouting out of the forest floor just as the warmth of spring arrives to thaw us out from winter's embrace.

Nature is full of contradictions of the best kind and I'm forever grateful for it.





Autumn



THE WINDING HILL

Caleb Edmondson

If you said this sunset was a swarm
of bright bodies, that there were robins
and dragonflies hovering just beneath
a big question of blue, I'd believe you.

I'd stick my head out the sunroof
and let the valley lower me
into the belly of October,
the thrash of falling oak
leaves, the wet dirt
smelling something like home.

Maybe there'd be a river, or a pond
with ducks, a cool, shallow place
where I could scoop the last whisper
of summer to my cheek, press its truth
into me—where I could give you
a reason for why I stand here today,
ready to remember how the soles
of my feet once breathed
their names into this mud.



THIS IS 35

Becca Zak

Up at dawn in a 50-degree room. Helpful embers remain in the wood burning stove, quickly catching the new additions on fire. Our deaf dog snores on the old green velvet futon in a mess of blankets and chewed up toys. Wouldn't it be nice to sleep undisturbed while being in a room full of sound? We were never good at being quiet in the morning, though we tried really hard this time.

Is her existence lonely? To be free of sound? To not awaken to a talkative flock of thirty juncos dancing on the frosted seed heads of goldenrod, spotted out the kitchen window? They sing to me, "Good Morning," "Happy Birthday," and "Welcome Home."

"Welcome Home" to the quiet, slow pace of the New England autumn. To no internet, to cooking on an indoor propane stove that requires you open windows for ventilation, to doing your business in an outhouse and washing up in an outdoor shower whose spring fed water maxes out at 58 degrees. Welcome to bear country, to porcupines lumbering across the roads, to a short walk down the gravel driveway to small-batch beer, sourdough pizza, and a welcoming community having important conversations.

"Welcome Home" to woods wandering, playing in the water of a cold creek, turning over rocks and stones in search of macroinvertebrates and salamanders, and all the other tiny, tender things. Welcome to a morning hike with your beloved in the deciduous forest wearing its fall wardrobe. "Welcome Back" to connection. To conversations and stories and community. Pause and breathe. "Welcome Back" to self-reflection and healing. *Have I been kind? Have I been patient? With myself? With others?*

I grasp my partner's extended forearm and climb across those slippery boulders leading to our final destination: a moss-covered log overlooking a small but mighty waterfall. Oh, to be the deaf dog, ungracefully tumbling into the pool at the bottom of the waterfall, now catching zoomies, buzzing around kicking up leaf litter and yipping in pure joy. Wrapped up in the things right in front of her, unable to hear, then linger on, every damn unimportant thing.





Winter



THE HOPE OF SPRING

Debbi Bollman

The blustery breath of winter air
Whirls all about the house
Beating down upon the ground
A torrent from the south
The birds wait hunkered down in trees
Clung forlorn to a branch
The mammals burrowed out of sight
Too cold to take a chance
Ice builds up on every surface
Freezing life in place
Time stands still and waits until
The sunlight shows its face
As dawn brings forth the faintest light
And dances o'er the snow
Like shining crystals beaming hope
That temperatures will grow
When at last the frost is past
The green of grass revealed
Forth comes the fauna out of rest
To frolic in the field





A DOOR IN THE FOREST

Anna Rogalski

Rain dribbled from a feverish January sky. The forest raised bare branches towards the sky, shaking its fists in silent frustration. I felt the same way. Rain in January? It wasn't right.

I hurried over sodden leaves and fragmented branches. Ferns nodded as I passed, wild roses snatched at my legs, and a few wet black walnuts slid like marbles beneath my boots. I nearly fell. I was moving too quickly. Why was I moving quickly? I didn't know, but a sense of urgency drove me deeper into the forest. Something was wrong. I didn't know if I was hurrying towards danger or away from it.

My boot slipped again. The mud and leaves gave way beneath me as I fell into the gorge—one of those slopes you only ever tumble down in dreams. I skidded over rocks, crashed into yearling trees, and splintered, rotten trunks. Finally, I came to rest at the bottom. Water trickled sullenly beside me, grumbling for its blanket of ice and snow. With a grumble of my own, I rose and stretched my back.

The sky spat in my face. I blinked away the water.

In that split second, the forest shifted.

Before me, a stick—oddly straight, oddly clean—laid atop the leaf litter. I don't know what compelled me to do so, but I took hold of the stick. When I tried to lift it up, I found it unnaturally heavy. I pulled again with all my strength. This time the stick came up in my hand. And something much greater as well. Leaves fluttered and dirt clods tumbled to the ground.

I had opened a door in the forest.

My steps, once rushed, were hesitant as I entered the subterranean passage. I knew this should lead deep underground, yet there was a glimmer of amber light before me.

“Hello?” I called. The light was getting closer as I walked. “Is anyone in here?”

A man’s silhouette darkened the passage. Light reflected off his round glasses, circles of concentrated curiosity.

“You’ve come to visit the forest?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, because I had no intention of staying here.

“Oh, that’s good to hear,” the man said.

I emerged into a circular chamber. Earth polished to look like marble formed the floor and stretched towards a ceiling which glowed like the sky on a cloudy morning, the source of light unseen.

The man’s bright eyes glistened like stars set into weathered oak.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “My name is Aldo. Let me show you our patients.”

“Patients?” I asked. Aldo was already striding down another polished-earth passage. “Is someone sick?”

He turned star-like eyes to me, startled. “Of course. The whole forest is sick. That’s why you came, isn’t it?”

Why had I come? What possessed me to run through the forest in this foul weather? Perhaps the answers were here.

Aldo stopped abruptly beside a door set into the earthen wall. The handle was eerily similar to the odd stick that brought me to this place.

“Our first patient,” Aldo said, and mustered a smile.

We entered a small room. A cot and a dresser stood opposite each other. A glass of water rested on the nightstand, and a man with a bold



chin and a bolder moustache was quietly crocheting in an easy chair.

“Morning, Mr. Elm,” Aldo said cheerfully.

The man looked at us and smiled beneath his whiskers. “Ah, Aldo! And you brought a friend, I see. How wonderful!”

He proffered a hand, and I shook it. A firm handshake, but there was a give to his skin, almost a sponginess. He looked healthy enough. A twinkle in his eye and a fine complexion despite his wrinkles. His jacket was on the large side, but other than that he hadn’t a hair out of place.

A few pleasantries passed between the men. I stood like an interloper beside the old friends with nothing to add.

“Have you seen Beechy lately?” Mr. Elm asked. “She’s not here, is she? I heard someone talking but you never know with these rumors, and you always hope....”

“Unfortunately, Mrs. Beech is with us now, yes,” Aldo said, his tone measured.

Elm frowned and pulled at his moustache. “Well, I wish her a speedy recovery. Hopefully she’s out before I am.”

Aldo smiled sadly. His silence spoke the words we didn’t want to hear.

“Anyhow... What’s the word on my condition?” Elm asked. “It feels like ages since I saw a nurse.”

“I don’t have your chart, Mr. Elm, but last I heard your numbers were looking good. I’d bet you could even go home for a while.”

“That would be swell. Just swell.” Elm’s moustache turned up in a smile, but the twinkle had left his eyes.

His cheeks seemed to have hollowed during our visit, his wrinkles deeper. The more I looked at him, the more evident his disease became. He was a man whose jacket didn’t quite fit anymore. A man past his prime.

He nodded to me, and we said our goodbyes.

“Mr. Elm is a frequent visitor,” Aldo said quietly as he closed the door. “His infection goes through phases, good then bad, bad then worse, then better... We’ve made an improvement, definitely, but he will never be what he once was.”

“Is his condition...” I struggled to find the words. Fatal? Permanent? Aldo seemed to understand.

“I think he’ll make it, but it’s a condition he’s going to have to live with for the rest of his life.”

“He mentioned a Mrs. Beech,” I said as we continued down the polished hall. “What’s wrong with her?”

Aldo sighed and stopped. Right by another door. His fingers closed around the handle, and he silently swung it open.

By the time we got into the room Aldo’s smile was back. Warm and reassuring.

“Good morning, Mrs. Beech,” he called softly.

This room was much the same as Mr. Elm’s, but the armchair was empty, and a deathly thin woman laid in bed. The ethereal light was dim, but the woman’s pearlescent skin glowed like a still pond reflecting moonlight.

“Aldo? Is that you?” Her voice was weak. She turned her eyes to me. “Did you bring a nurse?”



“Not a nurse. Just a visitor today.”

Tattoos encircled her wrists and forearms. Blocky letters reading *M+B, 10/9/2006, LILY 7/11/90*. Inscriptions attempting to capture eternity. She smiled at me and held out frail arms, welcoming. I stepped to her bedside and took Mrs. Beech’s papery hands, feeling absolutely wretched. I couldn’t help her, but she reached out to me nonetheless.

“What’s happening to me, Aldo?” Her words were slow and labored.

“A combination of different ailments,” Aldo replied. “We’re still trying to work out a treatment plan.”

She sighed and shook her head. Silver hair shimmered across her pillow. “It all happened so quickly... I was so strong for so long. Centuries. Millenia... Then I wasn’t. Has it really only been twenty years, Aldo?”

“Thirteen,” he said quietly.

“Well...” Mrs. Beech squeezed my hands. “If there’s hope for dear Elm, there’s hope for me.”

A smile creased her face, a sorrow-stained hopefulness that sunk into my heart like an axe. I felt ashamed for coming. For giving her hope—even inadvertently—when I could do nothing.

She yawned.

“We’ll let you rest,” Aldo said gently.

As if he’d invoked a magic spell, she slept. My hands slid out of hers, and we left Mrs. Beech to her slumber.

I walked silently beside Aldo, embarrassed. I wanted to ask if she would recover, but I knew that I wouldn’t like his answer.

We continued down the hall. This time, I heard the patient before I saw the door. A man screamed, a full-throated scream like a person on fire.

I stopped in my tracks and cast a glance behind me. I could go now. Return to the rainy January. Hurry home and forget I was ever here.

“You need not fear the forest while it lives.” Aldo’s voice drew my attention. His keen and somber eyes watched me like an owl from behind his round spectacles. “Rather, fear the day it dies.”

Aldo reached out his hand and opened another door.

The room looked as if it had been shaken. Blankets bunched and sagged at the foot of the bed. The dresser drawers were only half pushed in, and every available surface had at least one bloodied towel draped across it.

A man in a hospital gown paced back and forth across the floor. His delicate frame heaved from exertion, and his eyes darted around wildly. Raw skin and drops of blood lined his arms, his cheeks gouged by his own sharp nails.

“Mr. Ash, I have a visitor for you.”

“A visitor?” Ash spat. He hopped on one foot to scratch his ankle. “Visitors don’t do me any good. Visitors are what got me into this mess! I don’t need visitors. I need relief!”

He dragged his nails up the inside of his arms. He scratched the back of his neck, whimpering. His chest, moaning. His arms, shrieking.

“They’re under my skin, Aldo! They’re crawling under my skin, and I can’t get them out!”

“Mr. Ash—“



“Get them out!” He screamed. Harsh and high.

Then his frantic eyes found mine. *“Get them out! Get them out! Get them out!”*

I stood, transfixed. I wanted to run but couldn’t find the nerve. Ash kept ranting, kept tearing at himself.

After what seemed like years, Aldo took me by the elbow and guided me back into the hallway. The door dampened Ash’s torment as it closed.

Aldo continued and I followed, willing to go anywhere to escape the cries of agony. The screams faded from my ears, but not my mind. Someone brought these diseases. Visitors.

Again, I stopped.

“Aldo...” I began. “I shouldn’t be here. I’m not doing these people any good. Mr. Ash is right. I need to get out before I can do any more harm.”

I turned to leave.

“Wait!” Aldo called.

I paused, trapped. I couldn’t force my feet to venture back through Ash’s wretched screaming, nor could I bear whatever horror might come next.

“Just one more patient...” Aldo pleaded softly. “Please... few come to see her.”

Dread welled in my stomach, but I staggered forward yet again. We seemed to travel for a mile down the hall. Stillness hung in the air, and time hovered strangely alongside it. I had the feeling that the years passed down here like water in an underground spring. Unseen,

unheard, but ever flowing.

Finally, Aldo stopped by yet another door. I listened, expecting to hear a tortured outburst, a soft whimper, or even a simple cough. Instead, it was silent.

He opened the door.

This room was different than the ones before it. A dresser, coated in a thick layer of dust, stood lonely in one corner. In the other, a cot cradled a skeletal, unmoving form.

I hesitated in the doorway, holding my breath and watching the blankets for any subtle movement. After what seemed like too long, the sheets rose and fell with life.

“Who is this?” I whispered to Aldo.

“Ms. Chestnut,” he whispered back.

My feet carried me to her bedside. There wasn’t an ounce of substance on Chestnut’s frame, but I could see she was a tall woman, once beautiful and proud. Save the occasional breath, her body was as still and silent as death.

Suddenly, her limbs tensed. Her eyes snapped open. They looked wildly around for a moment before alighting on mine. There was no hope in them, no pleading, not even anger. Just resignation.

Then her eyes fluttered closed. Her body again went limp, and death’s mask returned.

I knelt at her bedside and took her hands in mine. Soft leather left out in the snow, cold as ice. I couldn’t even warm them up. All I could do was hold them and acknowledge the bitter chill.

Time passed. I struggled to find my voice.



“Will she wake up again, Aldo?”

“Yes,” he said. “She awakens periodically but always sinks back into her dormant state.”

“And there’s no way to reverse what’s been done to her?”

“Not that we’ve found. She’s trapped like this, eternally sleeping at the interface between her death and her rebirth. But some of her great-grandchildren can survive the condition. At least we’ve done that much.”

I don’t know how long I knelt beside her, our hands and hearts joined in silent mourning. I wanted to see her wake again, but I feared the moment when she would close her eyes.

“Come,” Aldo said. “I think that’s enough for one visit.”

I stood and the cold leather hands slipped from mine. Before I knew it, Aldo was closing Ms. Chestnut’s door, and we were retracing our steps through this strange and terrible place.

Helplessness enveloped me like a soggy sweater. I wanted to do something, but I knew I couldn’t help. I wanted to say something, but

words would be as hollow and empty.

“Thank you for coming,” Aldo said. “I hope you’ll visit us again.”

To my surprise, I was back in the round reception room, only yards from the door through which I entered.

“Why?” I asked. “I didn’t do any good here. I can’t change what’s been done to the forest. I don’t know how I can possibly change its future. I can’t even offer any comfort!”

Aldo studied me through his lenses.

“Perhaps not,” he said. “But you have seen the marks of death upon the wilderness, and you can be changed. The first step to healing is to know that you and the forest suffer together. You both live under the same miserable sky.”

Again, the strange urgency seized me. I hurried down the tunnel and out into the damp, afflicted January. The door swung shut behind me. Again, the forest shifted.

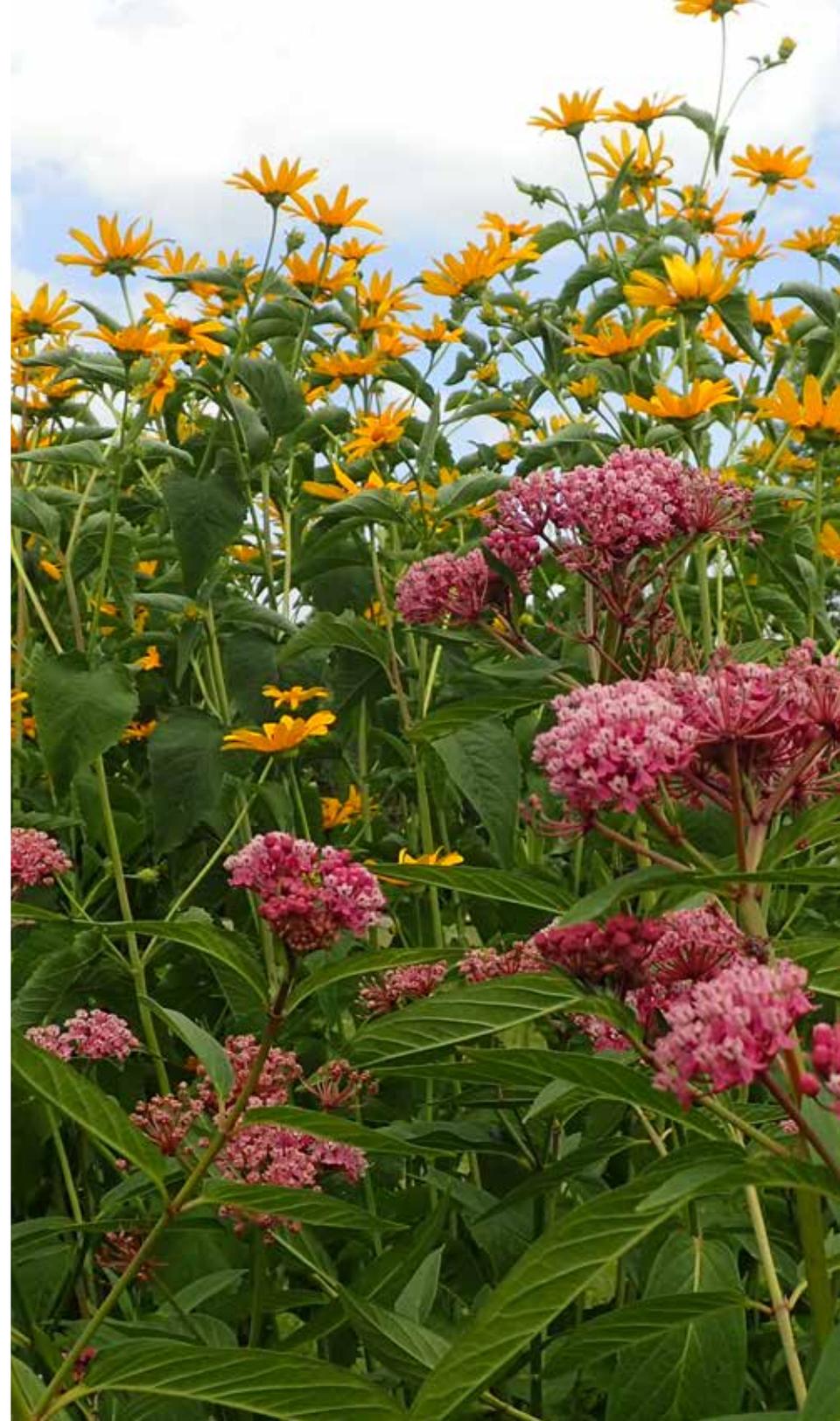
This time, I shifted with it.

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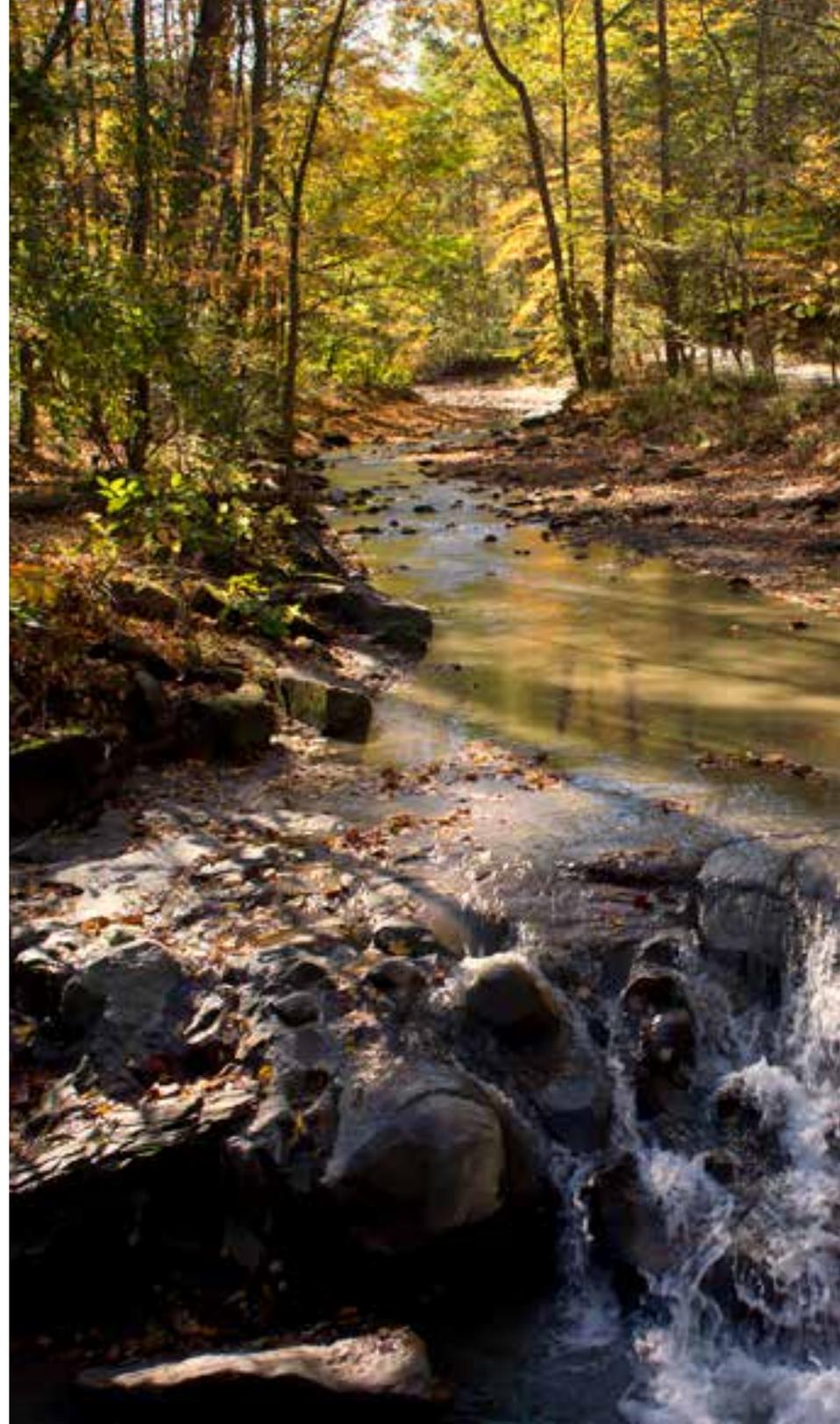
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