

Verdant
WONDERS
Literary Journal



Volume 2

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VERDANT WONDERS
VOLUME 2



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Spring



ODE TO THE HONEY BEE

Gemma Astley

I sit and wait in rays of light
And dream of your unencumbered flight.
The beat of wings and hum of song
Toward your home, where you belong.
Your sisters meet you at the door,
Well met and welcome heretofore,
The pollen heavy on your legs,
Golden dust upon your head,
Inside you venture with your treat,
Light and eager on sticky feet.
The scent of life and wax and Queen,
Winter's death is like a dream
Forgotten in the nectar flow
And golden light of Spring sun's glow.
To pantry made of hexan cells
Beside capped beds where new life dwells;
You leave your gift of golden light,
Pollen packed in safe and tight.
Then out you go to fly anew;
In Spring there is so much to do!
And here I sit and dream of you
And hope and pray my dream is true.
For I sit and wait in rays of light
And wish to join your joyful flight.





SPRING MORNING

Gemma Astley

It's a beautiful morning;
Where the world through my window
Is green and sunny
And it feels as if my soul
Is being pulled out of me
And up, up into the trees
Up into their leaves
Then sinking inside
Dissipating through their green veins
Sinking through their verdant blood
Deep, deeper into their branches
Their limbs, their trunk,
And down, down into their roots
The soil, the tiny rhizomes
That send word through the woods
They fling me as tiny chemical signals
Through the ground
And I fly
From tree root to tree root
A keen messenger in a dark world
Until I am flowing strong
In the lifeblood of the garden
And beyond
To the woods, the forest,
The very depth of the world
And I drowse, cradled there,
In the heart of the world.
It's a beautiful morning.

FOR HENRY MILLER

Janice Bury

I paint in order to see
How my world
Reveals itself to me
Give me a room
With a window
I will wait for whatever blows in
Hand me a sorcerer's wand
To conjure a great blue heron
Looking down
With watchful eye
Calling forth incantations of transparent hues
Bleeding, colliding
A dance with awe
At every imperfection and accident





I paint so I may love again
Arms reaching out
Circling the bright sun
Silver moon tugged to earth
By invisible tethers
Gathering dreams and delusions
Promises made and broken
A seductive chase of chaos
In a secret world
Luminous color
Lying dormant along
The edges of the pallet
Like a luna moth cocoon
Unraveling a magnificent creature
Living for ten days
Wings spread wide
Eye spot protecting from predators
That could destroy Chimera's power
The unearthing of visual poetry
Unfolding
In light and shadow



AFTER WE'RE GONE

Anna Rogalski

Five figures stood on a bridge staring into a ruined city. Empty windows and lifeless steel stared back like the eyes of the dead, unseeing.

“Ugly, isn’t it?” said Weathering.

Growth swatted his arm, leaving an imprint of lichen. “Weathering, you’re too harsh!” She smiled at the city’s carcass. “I like the scale of it! They built things so big!”

“Big, but ugly,” Erosion chortled, shaking sand from her floppy hat. “What was here before?”

“Swamps,” Weathering said. “Forests. Some rather pretty beaches and a nice stretch of river. Now it’s all been razed and entombed in concrete.” The last word was so cold it froze some standing water and a section of railing broke away, tumbling into the river.

“They tried really hard, though.” Growth gestured to the statues standing sentry on the bridge. “Just look at these carvings they made of themselves holding little tiny, um... vesicles?”

“Vehicles,” sighed Weathering. “Metal creatures that eat hydrocarbons. They rust.”

Mutation crouched and leveled his brilliant green eyes on the rim of an abandoned car.

He spun it with a screech. "I always wanted to make these. I got an axel going in some bacteria, but... eh, there's a lot of other stuff to do."

"And you've been procrastinating for the last billion years," droned Decay. A centipede crawled from behind his ear and down into his collar. He flicked a deathly pale hand towards the city. "Meanwhile, these clowns hardscaped an entire planet in a few thousand years. You made them too smart, Tate. And you, dear Growth, kept feeding them."

Growth gave him a helpless smile and shrug.

"Let's not start with the blame game," Weathering said. "We've got work to do."

The four figures again regarded the empty city.

"Wait!" Growth spun and counted heads. "Where'd Erosion go?"

"Gone with the wind, as usual," Weathering replied, and strode onwards. The harsh ground cracked beneath his feet—water, freezing and thawing. It wasn't difficult to break up the roads; there were already potholes.

Erosion—somewhere and everywhere—carried the old away and brought in the new. Growth followed, leaving a trail of seeds, eggs, and spores. Mutation lollygagged, poking whatever struck his fancy with a four-jointed finger.

"Always last, aren't I?" Decay grumbled and stomped the life into something rich and pliable. Then it all began again.

They crossed the bridge and Weathering meandered to the riverbank. "We'll make this quick: No trees, sandy soil...we'll move the river and knock out a good portion of—"

He frowned down at an embankment of deliberately placed rocks. He frowned harder, but the bank remained firmly in place. Mutation snorted and Growth smothered a giggle with birdsong. A muscle twitched in Weathering's jaw and broke off.

"Erosion!" he called to a figure piling rocks further up the riverbank. "Stop doing that!"

The figure straightened into a hulking form with long arms dangling from angular shoulders. Its head reflected the morning light like an artificial sun.

Steady Weathering stepped backwards, and Growth's ever-present smile faltered. "Who's that?"

"Gotta be Ro, right?" Mutation murmured uncertainly.

"No, I'm here." Erosion appeared holding an armload of dirt. Gravel trickled from a hole in her patchwork bag.

The stranger stared a moment longer, then retreated along the bank.

Growth shifted in a cluster of vetches, their seed pods popping. "Do you think there are



still some pebbles around?"

"Course there are still pebbles around!" Erosion tipped some loose stones from her bag onto the ground.

"I think she means 'people,'" Weathering grumbled and crushed the pebbles to dust beneath his heel.

Decay let out a rattling sigh. "Let me check the network..." He closed his eyes. Delicate white threads grew from every orifice of his face and from under his nails, flowing down like water and sinking into the ground. Mutation crept towards the threads, curiosity lighting his moon-gray eyes. Growth swatted his hand away.

"Hmm." Decay shook the threads into a rotting heap and reopened his eyes. "According to the mycelium, people still live in some places, but not here."

Thorny roses choked the vetches at Growth's feet. "If he's not one of us...and he's not one of them...who is he?"

"And what is he doing here?" Weathering murmured.

The five watched the receding figure uneasily.

"What are we waiting for?" Mutation's knees bent backwards as he took a leggy, bird-like step down the road. "It might be someone fun! Someone *new*!" He didn't look back.

Weathering followed. Water crystalized beneath his feet. The cracks in the path widened and deepened to reveal long-forgotten earth. "We'd better keep an eye on Mutation, or he'll start putting eyes on everything else."

"Eyes are fun!" Mutation's head swiveled around to reveal some fun new additions to his face. "I've made 'em a zillion different times!"

Erosion shuffled some dirt in her hands. "If the bank's stable? Where do I put this, then?"

Growth pointed to the cracks. Erosion dumped the soil and Growth planted an oak. Its roots wove into rocks that stymied Weathering and held them there.

They chased the ghostly stranger through a forest of steel, following his trail through plastic and gravel that carpeted the ground like leaf litter until he turned a corner and disappeared.

The five came to a halt in an open plaza. Street lamps rose from the ground like new sprouts, forever one day from opening their seed leaves. Growth smiled at a patch of earth. Fox grapes erupted from the ground and overtook the lamps.

Weathering tapped a vine-covered lamp with his toe and it toppled. He picked up a piece of lamp post and crumbled it like dry bread between his fingers as he looked in vain for the stranger. He sighed. Pockmarks appeared on the surface of a nearby building, deepening until they sang with the wind. Then the building groaned, tilted, and collapsed in a cloud of cement and rusted rebar. The dust settled, revealing a grassy field quickly overtaking a diamond-shaped dirt path.

Weathering continued, but Growth paused.

She squealed in delight. Birds chirped along with her, dropping seeds. Rain came, the seeds grew, and the water stayed. Decay softened the roots until they rotted. He smirked at Growth.

She smirked back, laying down new species. Swamp oaks and birches, catfish and sunfish. Leaves fell and so did logs. The sun fish died.

Decay's smile became a black grin. "Oops."

Growth just made the catfish bigger.

The carp inevitably came but—

Growth's brow crinkled. "Why aren't the carp growing? Are they sick?"

Mutation surfaced, holding a large gasping fish. "They're altered! Most of the spawn die spontaneously before reaching adulthood!"

Growth gaped at him.

"It wasn't me! Must've been him!" He pointed a webbed hand across the swamp.

The stranger crouched in the rushes, stirring the waters. Then he rose and limped away. The carp failed to thrive, and in their failing even more species appeared, old and new.

"It used to look something like this, didn't it?" Growth whispered.

"Yes," Decay replied. "It's different, but—"



“Uh-huh. Wetlands. Lovely!” Mutation jettisoned his carp. “But he’s getting away!”

Growth and Decay shared a look. “We’ll come back to this,” they said, then waded through the ankle-deep muck towards a clearing. Rusted vehicles, sunken foundations, crumbled facades, and mounds of sand indicated Weathering and Erosion had passed by.

They found Weathering standing in a downpour beside a green statue. Their features distorted in the rain’s harsh spray.

“He’s headed towards the lake.” Weathering pointed a gnarled hand northward. In the distance, the stranger staggered, caught himself on a signpost, and continued laboriously.

Growth, Decay, Weathering, and Mutation hurried through the quickly changing city. Diligent Erosion carted away loads of sand and stone. She pressed what remained into mounds which Weathering smoothed and compacted with a glance.

Mutation stopped abruptly. He grinned impossibly wide. “I have an idea.”

Growth ran into him in an explosion of wildflower seeds, and Weathering groaned so forcefully that the earth shook and nearby structures collapsed. “Tate, really? We have to go!”

Mutation dug his finger into a crack in the asphalt. The road sighed, then crumbled. The sigh kept rolling, to the horizon, and beyond.

“All right, I like the results,” Weathering admitted. “What did you do?”

“Lots of stuff eats hydrocarbons.” He winked. “Didn’t take much to convince the little guys that the dark goo is lunch.”

Erosion grinned. “No complaints here!” She tried to stuff loose gravel into her coat pockets but had to unload huge quantities of microplastics first.

“Another idea!” Mutation prodded plastics. The pile dissolved into organic sludge.

“And now they’re dead,” Decay said. “Congratulations, Tate. You finally built something interesting and they ran out of a food source.”

Mutation blinked his rapidly changing eyes then shrugged. “Eh. I can probably do it again.” He kept going.

The road ended on a large, flat plain of brick and mortar—a poor imitation of the lake that consumed the horizon. Weathering crushed the bricks beneath his boot. Erosion kicked the rubble into the water.

“If the lake rises, I’m spreading dead fish all over this area,” Decay said. “It’d do some good for the soil now that the people aren’t spraying nitrogen and phosphorus on the fields like rain.” His eyes rolled towards Growth. “My condolences to your hordes of aggressive, prolific, and aggressively prolific algae.”

“They haven’t been doing well, anyway.” She patted his arm and a few pillbugs rolled away. “But once we get oxygen back into the water I’ll grow something else! A few more wetlands and it’ll bounce right back.”

Mutation threw an arm around their shoulders. “Or we could make something that doesn’t need oxygen. Facultative anaerobes maybe. That way they won’t die immediately once—” His antennae twitched and he spun. “Oh hey! There he is!”

Sure enough, the lone figure watched them from a structure comprised of harsh angles, sleek glass, and great steel beams; something wholly unnatural. The stranger bent over, clutching his chest before staggering inside.

“He’s getting worse,” Growth whispered. “Maybe we can help him.”

“We can’t hurt,” Mutation said. “Not much, anyway.”

They hurried towards the lakeside structure. Weathering followed them and Erosion, as always, followed Weathering.

“Can’t we help him once he’s dead?” Decay called, stumping along behind. “It doesn’t look like we have to wait long.”

The five reached a gaping hole in the building’s side. The door had fallen away, its glass shattered by an optimistic box elder pushing itself through the pavers. Weathering nodded his approval to Growth.

They ducked inside. Stale air and a vacant desk welcomed them. An old sign and some brochures laid buried in dust upon the floor.

“Who’s paying for admissions?” Decay deadpanned.

“I’ll get this one, lovelies,” Erosion said, and left a pile of glass splinters on the counter.

They turned left, towards a wall of glassy alcoves. Growth clutched Decay’s arm and bound herself there with coiling vines. “What is this place?” she whispered. “Weathering? Do you know?”

Weathering wasn’t listening. He stood stagnant a few yards ahead, staring at a display of rock configurations. “They were stabilizing the river.”

Growth edged to a window overlooking the lake and placed her hand on the sign there. “They have pictures of my algal blooms.” Moss crept beneath her fingers. “They were building all sorts of structures to reroute runoff...”

“Hey!” All four jumped at the strangled yelp. Mutation stood at the far wall, scowling at a twisted ladder like a petulant child. “They were altering things, too! And they reversed some of my work!”

Decay's eyes rolled to just whites. "Here's a newsflash, Tate: not all your work's good."

"Neither's yours!" Mutation shot back. "I'd have liked to see those sunfish swim a little longer. You always ruin things before I can make them better!"

Growth's head whipped to Weathering. "And you knocked over that lamp and killed my grapes!"

"You wouldn't have been able to grow those without the organics I put there," Erosion grumbled.

"And you wouldn't have organic material to put there without *me*," Decay said. "And don't go accusing me of ruining things! Remember when this area used to be part of the lake? Remember when it used to be a tundra? An *ocean*? Remember when Growth wrecked the atmosphere? Remember when Erosion split apart the continent? We've all ruined beautiful things."

"But the ruin didn't last."

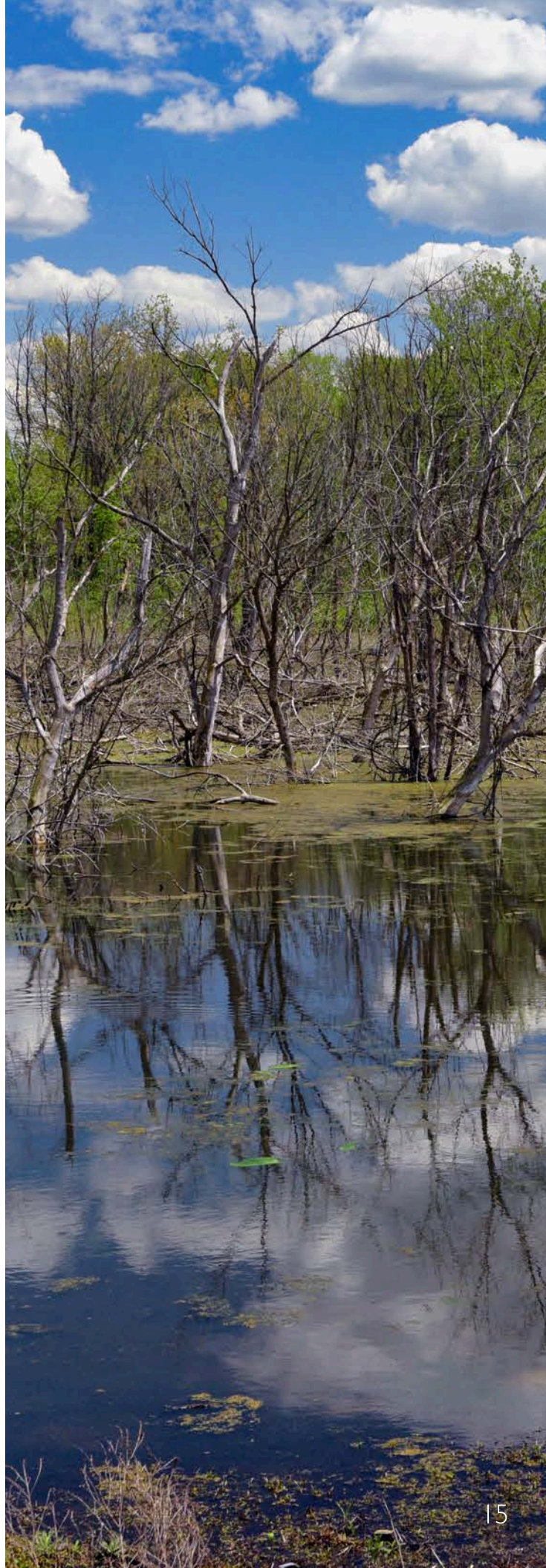
The five turned toward a small, dome-like capsule built for a world beyond. The stranger sat inside: a man with a chrome plated skull, shining glass eyes, and polymer shoulders. A cogwheel heart turned irregularly in his cracked ceramic chest.

"Who are you?" Growth breathed.

"I am Ingenuity." He gasped, the wheels whirring in his heaving chest. "I wasn't always like this. I've changed...but not as quickly as I changed the world."

"You made all of this?" Weathering asked.

"Yes. But you made all of *that*."



He spread his metalwork fingers towards the window. To the lakes and forests, wetlands and deserts. To birds and insects filling the air with their songs. To towering sand dunes and boulders forgotten by long-departed glaciers. To the places where organic matter lay buried, waiting for its next opportunity to live again.

To the world where life and landscape subtly shifted like colors in a near-eternal sunrise.

Ingenuity slumped against the capsule's door. "Each new phase of this world eclipses the last in an on-going cycle of beauty and ruin. I am one such phase." Ingenuity slid further. "Nearly at my end...and I'm ready."

Growth crept to Ingenuity's side and laid her hand on his chest. Moss grew in the thin layer. Decay placed his hand on hers and the moss died. Weathering grasped Ingenuity's shoulder, scoring plastic and pitting metal. The cogwheels creaked and squealed.

Erosion brushed her palm across the scarred surfaces and filled them with humus. More grew, more died.

"I am glad it will go on after we're gone," Ingenuity said. "Changed, but ever beautiful!"

Mutation took one finger and touched Ingenuity's shuddering heart. "Something special, just for you."

Infinitesimal buds opened into a carpet of white blossoms, as small and delicate as snowflakes. They spread through his cracked chest and across his shoulders, his face. The cogs turned one last time. Ingenuity grew still and for a moment the world turned around him.

"He had an unusual heart," Growth whispered. "But a good one at the end. Maybe we should keep him here. Just in case. Weathering?"

Weathering set his eyes northward. The window groaned against the wind and shattered, blasting them all with shards of glass and debris. The capsule's door blew shut, sealing Ingenuity inside.

Growth stilled. "If we see him again, he'll be different."

"Yes. For good or for ill, he will change," Weathering said and smiled. "Beautiful, isn't it?"





UNFROZEN

Hillary Yocum

I wake to the bright, fluttering trill of birdsong,
The room still holding the cold silence of winter.
The windows sealed shut
From months of resisting the world outside.
When I force them open,
A soft burst of air spills in—
Dewy and fragrant.
I draw in a deep breath
As if my lungs have been waiting for this exact moment.
For the first time in months
when I inhale deeply,
My lungs don't sting, but welcome the warmer air and I feel rejuvenated.

Outside, the trees blush with tiny buds,
Each one a quiet promise for the start of something beautiful.
I tuck a twenty into my jacket pocket,
A little future joy for the next first snowfall.
I shed my heavy coat—
Letting it fall away like the final layer
Of a creature learning its colors again.

I walk until I meet the season's first cherry blossom
Delicate, pale pink, trembling slightly
As if finally rising awake too.
Above me, the warm sun presses gently into the shadows I've carried
Through the long, muted months.

The world that was once a blanket
Of white and worn out gray
Begins to bloom with courage
Tulips rising in radiant, confident clusters,
Grass sharpening itself
Into bold streaks of green.

In the distance,
Children's laughter bursts open
Like wildflowers echo across the thawed earth.

And in that moment,
Everything feels washed clean—
New, hopeful, alive again.





Summer

MY VALLEY VIEW

Lacy Bartley

Let my worries soar away
on the wings of wild geese
and feel the breath in my lungs finally release

Let the leaves of trees
with their faces reaching to the sun
give me shade and rest when the miles have been run

Let the long fingers of the unruly weeds
brush my legs and arms
and say hello with their wild, wonderful charms

Let me see the bright sweater
nature puts on during fall
winter, spring, summer, a garment for all

Let the fireflies dance
and moon shine down
like stardust and midnight magic, lost and found

Let me always fall in love
with branches, stems, and roots
hear the chorus of whistles, rustling, and hoots

Let everyone find their joy
like ripples on a lake
spreading out wide as a still pond awakes





A BEE IN THE MEADOW

Debbi Bollman

I am a bee in the meadow
I glide along the breeze and allow it to carry me where it wishes
I trust the wind, because it always seems to know its own direction
It leads me to a bee balm flower and sets me down gently
What a fitting haven for a bee
I grab the soft fragrant petals and settle in for a spell
Drinking in the nectar, I am thankful for its gift
I take in the moment and soak up the sun
And before I know it, I'm aloft again
With the twisting of my wings, I create a vortex with the wind, riding it to my next destination
The striking purple coneflower looks quite inviting
I choose my landing carefully, knowing its spiny heart
But if I treat it with respect, I know it will reward me abundantly in nectar and pollen
This time I am joined by a fellow traveler, weary and eager to share
I move over a little and allow the stranger some room to land
Though similarly clothed in black and yellow, my guest is much larger
I admire her tiger stripes and the elegant tails on her wings
After drinking her fill, she sets off floating gracefully with my friend, the wind
I give my thanks to the flower and rise up once more
Setting sail with the breath of the field, I look out onto the feast before me
Where will it take me next?
I worry not, for I know I will be OK
I know I am cared for
I know I am home
I am a bee in the meadow



A SUMMER CLOUD

Jeremy Brown

I want to drift on a spider silk thread
and weightlessly wander the world

I want to grow in the springtime sun
and bloom as my petals unfurl

I want to ride on an opossum's back
and feel her motherly love

I want to fly on a chimney swift's wings
and witness the world from above

I want to live on a summer cloud's time
with nowhere to eventually be

I want to sway with the waves of wheat
as far as the eye can see

I want to rise up as tall as an oak
and give shade to the forest below

I want to swim through a wandering stream
and lose track of myself in the flow

I want to nap in a fox's fur
as soft as the coo of a dove

I want to melt in a snowflake's shape
and soak in the wool of a glove

I want to flow like an ocean tide
and follow the wake of its ebb

I want to be one with the natural world
and remember my place in its web

WHAT WILL BE LEFT

Gracelynn Ferrell

My grandparents own a house
in Florida.

Right on Alligator Lake.

When I go down every summer, I stop
And think.

One day, this house
will be mine.

One day, I'll take my
kids here, every year.

One day, I'll take my grandkids here,
and I'll hold them
on this very dock.

But there are things happening.
Things happening—all too fast.

The trees across the street,
Cut down.
A new development is going in.
No, wait, there's two.
Maybe that's why
so many trees are being
cleared?

And when I go back,
back into the house,
I stop.



Last year
was hottest on record.
Natural disasters—an all time high.

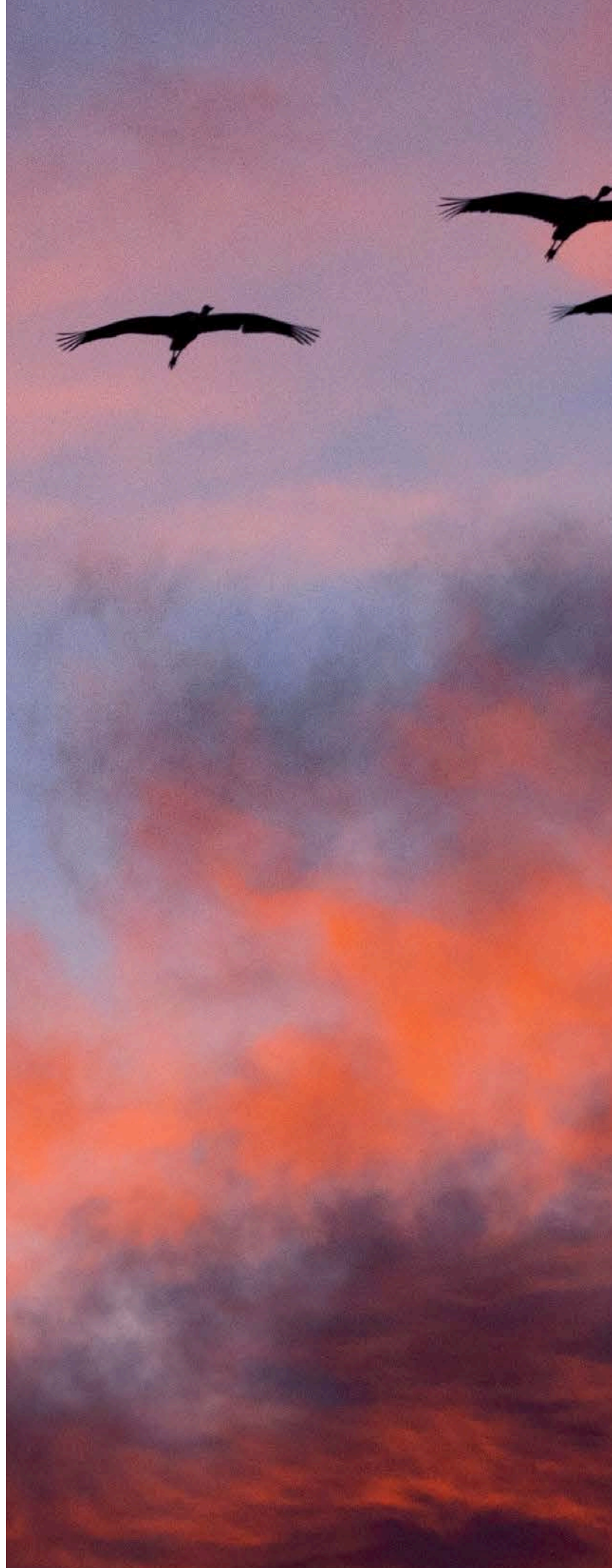
Headlines stack faster than
I can read them.
Records broken.
Protections reversed.
Numbers rising
where forests used to be.
Where forests
should be.

I am scared.

I am sixteen, and I am scared.
Scared of an inherited world, burning.
Scared the Earth
is past the point of fixing.

Scared that I will have
nothing left.

Scared that
when I have children,
The ocean will be acid.
The grass will all die.
There will be nothing
but smoke in the sky.





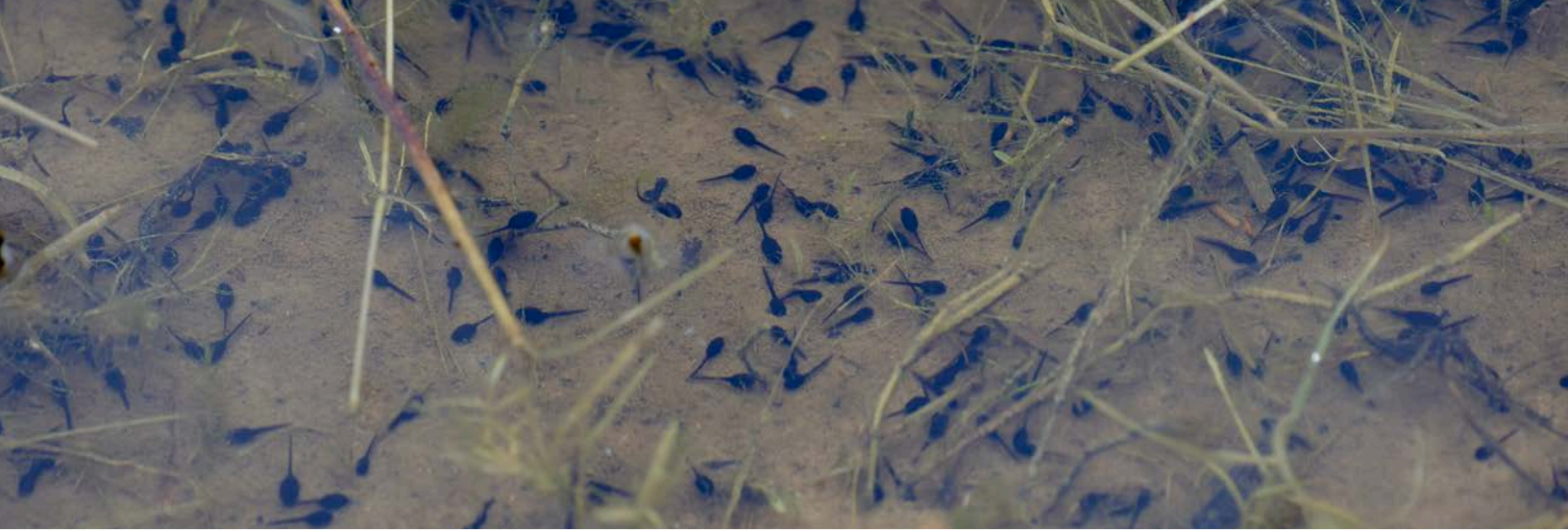
Scared that
when my children
Have children,
and I am nothing but
old as mahogany,
I will be standing
on this dock
holding a small hand.

I am scared
that I will point
at the lake,
my mother's childhood,
and mine.

I will point
out into the wild
I used to know.

The lake
I used to swim.

And there will be
nothing,
nothing there.



TADPOLES

Emily Rae Rusu

The river rippled with the jump of a froglet, the sound echoing between Adrianna and Daryl.

The poor thing, still learning how to use its new legs.

Lightning bugs emerged from hiding, and crickets picked up singing where the birds left off. Adrianna glanced at Daryl, tucking her long brown hair behind her ear, wedging dirt between every strand. His lips pursed, shoulders slumped, eyes staring at nothing in particular. When did his face change? When did his shoulders get so broad? When did he get so...

Adrianna held her breath to stop the wrong words from coming out.

Daryl used to be so easy to talk to. The summer nights spent catching frogs in the pond, the glowing sun highlighting the droplets they splashed around their feet.

But now...

"Why don't we ever come here anymore?" Adrianna pushed the words out.

Daryl shrugged, focused on a dragonfly skimming the top of the water. No response. His new, typical answer to everything.

Adrianna fidgeted, a pit in her stomach growing. Maybe if she asked the right question... "Remember when we caught five frogs in one day? We should come back here tomorrow and try to beat our record." She held her breath at the invite, her last resort. Maybe he'd agree. Maybe he'd smile and say that was exactly what he needed to get him out of his sour mood.

Maybe—

“Frogs?” His face twisted, and Adrianna's stomach twisted with it. Daryl's face threw his stone into the water. It skipped once, enough to disturb the congregating mosquitos.

“Y-yeah. You love catching frogs!” What happened to him? Tears stung her eyes, and she swallowed them back. What was happening to them? “You called me your tadpole.”

Daryl picked up a flat stone. “Yeah,” he said flatly. As if the memory meant nothing.

Heat rose through her body, despite the nighttime chill falling over them. She turned toward Daryl and placed her hand on his forearm, squeezing too tight. As if holding onto him would keep him there. “And then we found all those tadpoles! I ran home and got a jar, then they lived on my porch for a couple weeks. We watched them lose their tails and grow some legs.” Her voice broke. “None of them survived to be a frog though.”

“Because they couldn't grow up trapped in a stupid jar.” Daryl skipped another stone, forcing her arm off his. The stone no longer rippled in golden sunlight, only dull, gray water.

Crickets chirped, but the silence was more deafening.

Adrianna slid her hand off his arm, leaving a trail of dirt behind, and watched as the stone held onto the top layer of water, as if the tighter the stone gripped, the bigger the ripple it made. Eventually, it gave up and let go, sinking to the bottom.

“I told Mark I'd meet him at the steak house, I should get going,” he stood up and rubbed the dirt off his hands.

Adrianna sat up straighter. “So soon?” No. No, he had to stay at the pond. Where they didn't have to worry about anything. The pond meant everything to her. And if it meant nothing to him, then what did that—



He shrugged. "What more is there to do?"

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. If she could say the perfect words, maybe he'd stay a minute longer. A minute longer of being friends. Of soaking up the setting summer sun.

"I'll see you later," he said and turned away, taking the last minutes with him.

Adrianna's throat tightened, forsaking her as it blocked words from escaping. But words wouldn't help. He was gone. Walking down the path, leaving her. Alone.

With a deep breath she turned away, toward the river, and walked until the cold water covered her feet and the mud squeezed between her toes. The last minutes of sunlight faded away, leaving the pond gray and lifeless as tadpoles swam in circles at the disturbance of her feet.

They'd never play in the mud again. Never swim in the river. Never watch tadpoles. The memories were gone.

Daryl was gone.

And one day, the tadpoles would sprout legs, become frogs, and they'd be gone, too.

Adrianna swallowed back tears as she ran her fingertips through the cold water, past the tadpoles swimming in their temporary home.

Because they wouldn't be tadpoles forever.

Soon enough, they'd have to become frogs.



BRUST PARK

Becca Zak

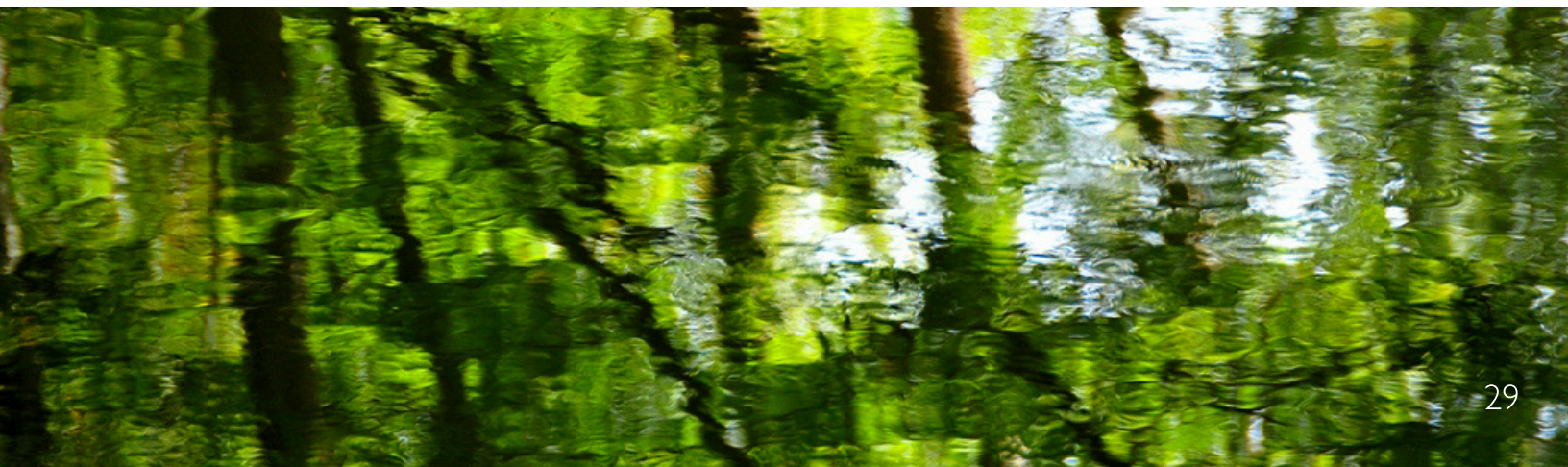
The waters of the Cuyahoga provide more than they'd realize, if water had the power of thought or even an awareness for the beings in and around them. We use them as a vehicle for recreation, joy, respite, temperature regulation, draining the energy of a cooped-up dog who wilts in the relentless heat that was the entire summer.

We started going as a matter of convenience. Brust Park is 2.1 miles away from our house. Six minutes by car, 12 minutes by bike, and 46 minutes on foot. Proximity matters.

If my childhood home wasn't bordering Cuyahoga Valley National Park, would I care for the water as much as I care about it today? If I was never able to giggle with the salamanders, glide with the butterflies, be held by the tenderest of trees on top of the hill overlooking the valley, whose moss-covered feet soaked up the sometimes sorrowful, often angry, rarely joyful tears of a feral 11-year-old trying to navigate adolescence, where would I be? If I didn't have endless rock-hopping through the shallow water of the nameless backyard creek to draw out the angst through play and imagination, would I have made it to adulthood?

I come to you again, water, for those tried-and-true healing abilities, now as an overburdened adult whose steadfast commitment to remaining childlike, kind, and determined to quietly make the world a better place is a heavy ask.

Today's not the last day that I'll ask you to do what you do best; put me on the rinse cycle. You're the most trusted drawing salve. A benevolent leech that coaxes the existential dread out and away from my fibers. You're not exactly parasitic, though, because you leave something helpful behind. In place of dread, you leave temporary peace. For that I am grateful and will return.



Autumn





THREADS BENEATH THE TREES

Eric Bramer

I've learned that walking slowly is the only way to see what the forest is really doing. Mushrooms taught me that. The moment I step onto a trail, my eyes drift toward the forest floor, scanning for shapes, textures, and colors that weren't there the week before. I focus on observing, letting the forest reveal its treasures, aware that foraging isn't permitted in Summit Metro Parks.

Instead, I watch, study, and notice the small, fleeting details that make each forest visit unique.

What draws me in isn't just their appearance, though that can be striking. It's the hidden network beneath the soil, the mycelium threads connecting tree roots, transporting nutrients, communicating chemical signals, and breaking down fallen wood and debris. Each mushroom is a visible tip of a vast underground system, a small announcement that life continues quietly and efficiently beneath our feet. When I look for mushrooms, I feel plugged into that network, almost as if the forest itself is letting me in on a secret.

This network fascinates me because it's both invisible and incredibly active. Mycelium acts like the nervous system of the forest, connecting plants and trees in ways that are often invisible to the human eye. A single patch can stretch for hundreds of feet, linking roots from different species of trees, sharing water, nutrients, and chemical signals. It's a silent collaboration that keeps the forest alive and balanced. Observing mushrooms is a way to witness this connection: each fruiting body tells a story about the roots, the fallen logs, the soil, and the living organisms around it.

Even so, mushroom identification has a way of humbling you. For every variety I recognize, dozens more leave me flipping through field guides or snapping a photo to research later. Some days I find nothing familiar at all, and I walk away reminded of how vast the fungal world really is. That realization used to frustrate me, but recently it's become part of the appeal. Not knowing keeps me curious. It keeps me moving slowly. It keeps me looking.

One afternoon, that curiosity turned into something unforgettable. I was on a guided walk with a naturalist when we noticed a pale shape on a fallen log just off the trail. At first it looked like sunlight catching on bark, but as we stepped closer, the outline sharpened into something

impossibly delicate: long, icicle-like spines cascading down a decaying hardwood trunk.

A bear's head tooth.

It isn't technically rare, but it only grows on certain well-aged hardwood logs in forests that have been allowed to mature and rot in peace. Some people see it every year; I've only stumbled across one or two in my lifetime. That unpredictability gives each encounter a sense of discovery. The naturalist and I stood there, quietly taking it in. The mushroom felt both common and extraordinary at once, the kind of organism that hides itself in plain sight until the conditions and the observer line up just right.

In that silence, I became aware of everything else around us: the scent of damp leaves, the movement of air through the canopy, the subtle chorus of insects and distant birds. I noticed how the fallen log, decomposing slowly, fed the mushrooms, the soil, and even the surrounding saplings. The bear's head tooth wasn't just a mushroom; it was a lens through which I could see the forest's hidden connections. Each organism, from the tiniest insect to the largest tree, played a role in the cycles of life unfolding silently all around me.

These walks have taught me to notice patterns. I observe how some mushrooms appear only in certain seasons, how their fruiting can indicate moisture levels or soil health, and how some species favor specific trees or other decaying material. I watch how the sunlight filters





through the canopy differently depending on the time of year, how fallen leaves and needles influence the growth of fungi, and how animals, small and large, interact with the environment in vital ways. The forest is not a static backdrop; it is a dynamic, interconnected system, and mushrooms are one of its most unique messengers.

Since that day, every walk feels like a continuation of a conversation with the woods. I still don't know a lot of what I find, and I've grown comfortable with that. In a way, the not knowing is what opens the door to paying attention. Each mushroom, common or unusual, familiar or confusing, is an invitation to pause, to learn, and to sense the forest's rhythms more deeply. I take note of the decay, the moisture, the color of the moss, and the position of each log and rock. Every detail is a clue about how the forest sustains itself and how the invisible threads beneath my feet orchestrate life above ground.

Mushrooms have taught me patience, humility, and the value of observation. They've shown me that even in a forest I've walked a hundred times, there is always more to discover. And most importantly, they've shown me that by simply paying attention, slowing down, and respecting the rules of the park, I can witness the forest's hidden threads as I explore. In this busy world, sometimes you just need to slow down and smell the mushrooms.



FALL HANDS

Mitch Maggio

Fall leaves in small hands,
Smells of harvest's end restore,
Tiny footsteps crunch



SAME TRAIL DIFFERENT PATH

Heather Morrow

The trail remembers my footsteps,
yet the path greets me as if it's the first time.
It feels like yesterday the leaves were green,
Today, they are gold and falling slow.

The creek sings in shifting voices after the fallen rain—
one day a low roar over rocks,
sometimes hushed,
holding on to a mysterious world beneath the surface.

The wind speaks different languages,
even the silence here is never the same.

Shadows stand at new angles,
birds sing and soar in the air.
I arrive with a different mood,
altering my point of view.

No hike is ever repeated, even if the trail remains the same.
Offering a new understanding,
new inspiration, and new perspectives I may have missed before.





WITH MELANCHOLY AND TREASURE

Patricia Terstenyak

So many words float amongst the leaves,
Carefully, carelessly.

They fall with armor and fear,
With grace and flutters,
With wisdom and scratches,
With reckless abandon and sophistication,
With promise and denial.

They land,
magnificent words, dried leaves.
They crash,
carefully, carelessly onto even drier land
and muddy waters.
Observed and used,
used and forgotten,
used and remembered.

Too many words without meaning,
swirling in the clouds,
attempting to find their owner.
Leaves providing guidance and shelter,
protection from the downpour.



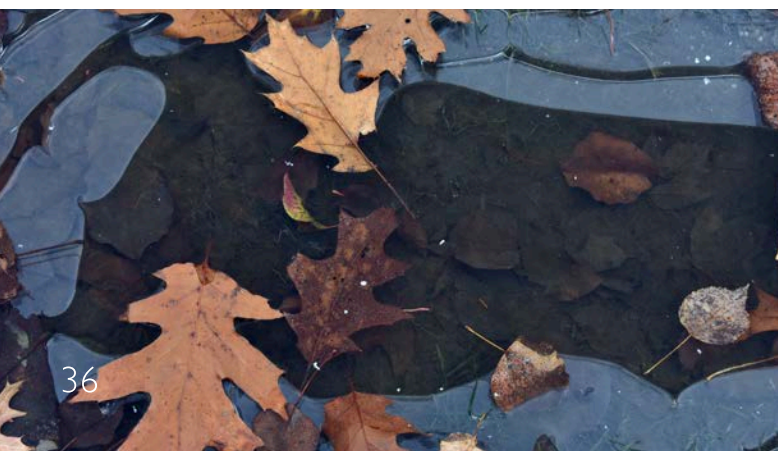
Just enough words to provoke
the spaces between barren branches,
to awaken the senses.

Just enough words to cause chaos and calm.
Just enough words to summon mystery,
enough words to comfort death.

So many words float amongst the leaves,
Carefully, carelessly.

They fall with history and love,
with puzzlement and confidence,
with languish and direction,
with melancholy and treasure,
with bounty and life.

Carefully, carelessly these words crash,
filling the gaps of time.





THIS IS 36

Becca Zak

Overcast autumn horizons framing agricultural fields transition to sunshiny tones in a *Toy Story* sky as forests and rugged terrain fill the dashboard. Hiss Golden Messenger, Rising Appalachia, and River Whyless provide the soundtrack for the solo, and therefore introspective, 530-mile drive. I travel south to spend time with family members more important than the 10-year gap in visitation would suggest.

Boundaries were set; my hip is screwed up. Hiking in Asheville is not like hiking anywhere in Ohio. Let's please explore some beginner-friendly trails to take in the beauty of the Blue Ridge Parkway, that most certainly will not disappoint. Unloading packed bags took backseat to long-awaited hugs and affection from the mom I never had, and the now 16-year-old pitbull terrier who started it all. Oh, Lu. Old now, so white, and arthritic and riddled with cancerous tumors. You still smile that puppy dog grin and stomp your feet in senior excitement for the human I wasn't sure you'd recognize. Your brain has proven to be a steel trap after all those evenings when we'd share a walk then a bed prior to early mornings reporting to Liberty Park.

I woke up next to a pile of bear scat. Not a real pile. It was that same pile I gifted you, my crazy, creative, caring, and comical aunt, after nearly a decade ago you grabbed a similar one off the display counter and shoved it down your pants. A pointer finger over your lips kept the "secret" between us, and you walked outside toward your son and daughter, my dear cousins. "I don't feel good; I think I need to find a bathroom," you said as the giant pile of rubber scat unconvincingly bounced a foot off the ground and landed flat side up. "You're such an idiot," was the reaction, with eyerolls and slow, moody, teenage head shakes.



We naturally gathered in the sunroom, allowing the eastern sun to warm our bones, curtains rising with the light. The bodies in the small room slowly grow to four, as waking attracts curious and excited minds to plan out the day. A chorus of neighborhood birds catches my ear, and I introduce you to *Merlin*, now your morning routine companion.

We hiked in the neighborhood. The devastation from Hurricane Helene is still evident in the trail maintenance. A visible reminder of why last year's trip was postponed and, more importantly, of her power and her might and how no one is immune to the blatantly predictable yet uncertain future that lies ahead in a changing climate. This land-locked sleepy artists' town in the middle of the mountains is still being rebuilt. There was this sort of noticeable anthropause in the wake of the flooding Swannanoa, much like during the initial stages of the pandemic, where people stopped people-ing and wildlife reclaimed their space, albeit short-lived. Is that what it takes for reclamation? Complete devastation?

The winding single-lane road cut in and out of the ancient granite ridge, offering scenic glimpses of the eastern then western horizon. I never doubted her abilities, but Betty surprisingly handled those corners like a playful, fleet-footed champ. Do North Carolina residents drive stretches of the nearly 500-mile-long Blue Ridge Parkway, passing scenic overlooks, glancing over at the unassuming black bear eating acorns not 30 feet from the double yellow line, take for granted the inherent beauty all around them? Guilty, as charged by this Ohioan whose daily commute dances on the edges of breath-taking public lands, while also passing through, and inevitably being stopped by more than half of the 23 traffic lights between home and work.

Back to Appalachian folk music, that over-priced pretzel and food truck empanadas, coming before a sunset walk along the French Broad River where we noticed a muskrat scurrying between reeds and some birds too far off to identify. Of course, I forgot my binoculars.



Winter

SWARDED AND SKYBOUND

Collin Bartley

Wings swishing as we flap
So close yet refusing to tap
The formation helps the weak
As we fly wingtip to beak

Through skies of gray, orange and blue
We see land from bird's-eye view
Over fields of corn and grain
We fly in our 'v', our skein

Soaring south for the winter
Our families never splinter
We take our time and make our way
From northern stream to southern bay



In springtime we must return
Meadows and muskegs we yearn
We nest by waters sordid
In banks shallow and swarDED

We build our nests from gathered reed
The comfort of eggs guaranteed
We lay our heads beneath our wings
Await the life that springtime brings

With our mate every year
We stand our vigil austere
We will honk and we will hiss
When we see something amiss

We guard our young without excuse
Against all threats we make no truce
Our charges safe, we stand tall
We are proud geese after all





WHAT THE WINTER FOREST WHISPERS

Eric Bramer

Winter has a way of softening the world. The morning I stepped onto the trail, the woods seemed to gather themselves into a hush, as if the season had pressed a gentle finger to the lips of every living thing. Even the air felt subdued thin, pale, and edged with a quiet that was almost reverent.

I followed the path into the trees, my boots sinking slightly into the thin quilt of snow that had fallen the night before. Each step made a subtle crunch, a small reminder that I was a visitor in a place that did not need my sound. The forest, stripped down to its bones, carried a clarity I had forgotten existed. With every breath, the cold settled cleanly into my lungs, as if winter itself were rinsing the noise out of me.

There is a particular stillness that only a winter forest can create. It's not silence, not truly. The world is always making some sound. But in winter, the sounds feel intentional. A branch snapping under weight somewhere beyond sight. A soft flutter of wings as a sparrow shifts from one bare limb to another. The creak of tree trunks adjusting to the frost. None of it fills the space. Each sound simply marks it.

As I walked, I noticed how the season reveals things that are hidden the rest of the year. With the undergrowth pressed flat and the leaves long gone, the shapes of the woods stood clearer every bend of branch, every twist of bark, every forgotten stump rising like a memory. The forest felt honest in winter. Nothing dressed up, nothing blooming for show. Just form, texture, and the quiet endurance of things that have learned how to wait.

The trail curved alongside a small creek, a narrow ribbon of dark water threading its way through snow-covered banks. Though much of its surface was sheathed in thin ice, the current continued beneath it, moving with a muted but persistent whisper. I stopped to listen as the water flowed beneath the ice.

Water speaks differently in winter. In summer it laughs, splashes, tumbles. But now, its voice was low and deliberate, as though it didn't want to disturb the resting woods. The sound blended with the faint rustle of dry leaves still clinging to their branches, those stubborn leaves that refuse to fall until winter finally forces them to let go. They shivered in the cold breeze, offering their own soft commentary to the quiet morning.

As I continued deeper into the trees, the world grew stiller, more sparse. The canopy opened to a winter sky the color of washed stone. I found myself slowing down without realizing it, moving at the pace the forest set. Winter does that. It encourages a gentler rhythm, one that asks more of your attention and less of your hurry.

It was then that I heard it: not a sound, exactly, but a shift. A change in the quality of the air. I stopped walking. Even the breeze had settled. In that moment, I became aware of the subtle pulse of the woods, something I felt more than heard.

The winter forest whispers in its own language, a mixture of stillness and small signs. A single tuft of snow drifting from a branch. A squirrel's tracks crossing the path in a hurried but intentional pattern. The faint, almost imperceptible groan of a freezing limb tightening under the morning sun.



These are not messages meant for understanding. They are reminders, quiet ones, that the forest remains alive even in its deepest rest, and that rest is vital to its continued endurance.

The hush of winter is often mistaken for emptiness, but that isn't what I felt. Instead, the stillness carried a fullness, a presence. Without the noise of summer insects or the riot of green growth, I could sense the quieter layers of the woods: the soil breathing beneath its cover of frost, the trees conserving their strength, the seeds holding tight to promises the season hasn't forgotten.

Standing there, surrounded by the bare architecture of the forest, I realized how rarely in life we allow ourselves to be quiet. Not just silent, but quiet in the way winter is patient, observant, unhurried. We move so fast, speak so much, fill every moment with tasks and screens and noise. Winter asks us to listen.

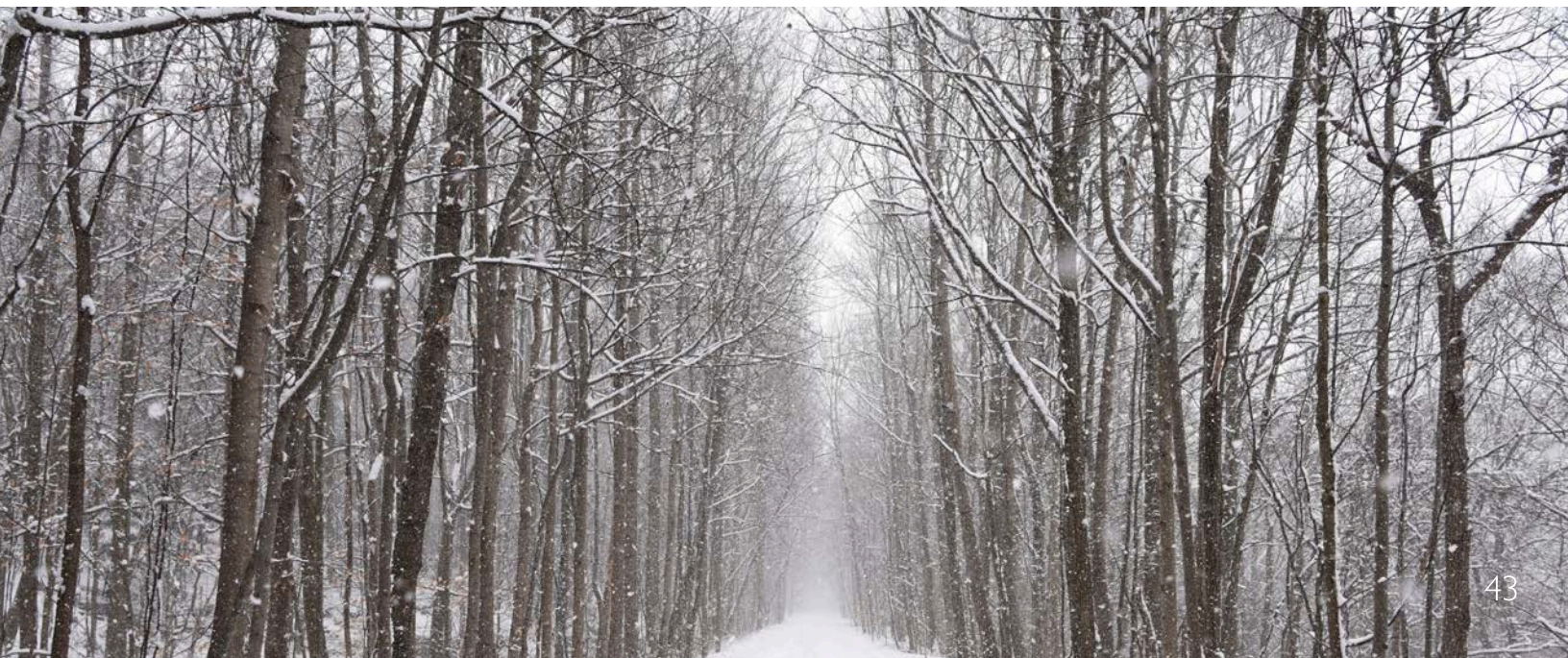
I listened.

And in the cold air, with snow settling lightly around me, I began to feel something inside me settle too. Not everything needs immediate growth. Not every moment demands action. Some seasons, both in the woods and in life, exist so we can rest, gather ourselves, and let the deeper things root.

The forest teaches this without saying a word. Its whisper is a lesson in stillness, a reminder that even in the quietest months, life is quietly preparing for what comes next.

As I turned back toward the trailhead, the sky began to brighten. The sun, still low on the horizon, cast long, blue shadows across the snow. The woods remained calm, unbothered by my departure. Winter had offered its lesson, and I felt lighter for having listened.

I left the forest carrying the soft quiet with me, a whisper of winter I could return to whenever life grew loud again. Get out and enjoy the quiet this season, we can all use it.





WINTER'S PALETTE AND THE STORIES IN THE SNOW

Eric Bramer

Winter has a quiet way of revealing the forest in ways other seasons cannot. The brilliant greens of summer are gone, replaced by a muted palette of browns, grays, and whites, yet the world is far from colorless. As I walk along a familiar trail on a crisp winter afternoon, the subtle hues of winter demand attention: the bronze remnants of fallen oak leaves pressed into the snow, the chartreuse of lichen clinging to tree trunks, the deep green of moss carpeting rocks and logs. These colors, understated as they are, reveal stories of life persisting beneath frost and ice, a quiet testimony to resilience.

Beneath my boots, the snow is not a uniform white. Shadows cast by bare branches turn pale blue, and sunlight filtering through the trees warms patches to soft gold. I notice the delicate contrast between the dark ridges of maple bark and the smooth, pale trunks of birches. Even in a season of dormancy, the forest is full of texture, tone, and intricate detail. Observing this subtle palette encourages a careful attentiveness, a mindfulness that slows the rhythm of the walk and sharpens the senses.

And then I notice the tracks. Small impressions in the snow, delicate and precise, hint at the secret movements of the forest's winter residents. A set of tiny, oval marks leads off the trail—likely a squirrel hopping from branch to branch and landing on the forest floor. Nearby, deeper prints in pairs, spread wide, suggest the passage of a deer, its hooves pressing into the soft snow as it searches for hidden vegetation. Each trail tells a story: who passed by, how they moved, and how they survived the cold. The forest, silent to casual observers, speaks eloquently to those who pause.

The tracks themselves introduce new colors into the landscape. Dark impressions in white snow, occasionally glinting with frost, stand out sharply, emphasizing contrast.

Sometimes a small dusting of rust-colored leaves partially covers prints, blending natural tones with ephemeral patterns in the snow. Even the faint brown of a branch falling onto a fresh patch of white can create a striking visual narrative. Winter, it seems, has its own palette, carefully curated to highlight the movements and presence of life that continues even when most things sleep.

Observing the tracks, I consider the animals themselves and the adaptations that allow them to endure. Squirrels rely on stored food and nimble agility; deer navigate with careful steps over snow and ice; birds, when present, perch and feed strategically, their muted plumage blending with winter tones. Each footprint, each impression, is evidence of persistence and survival. There is a factual, observable rhythm here: life continues in calculated ways, interacting with the subtle colors and structures of the forest.



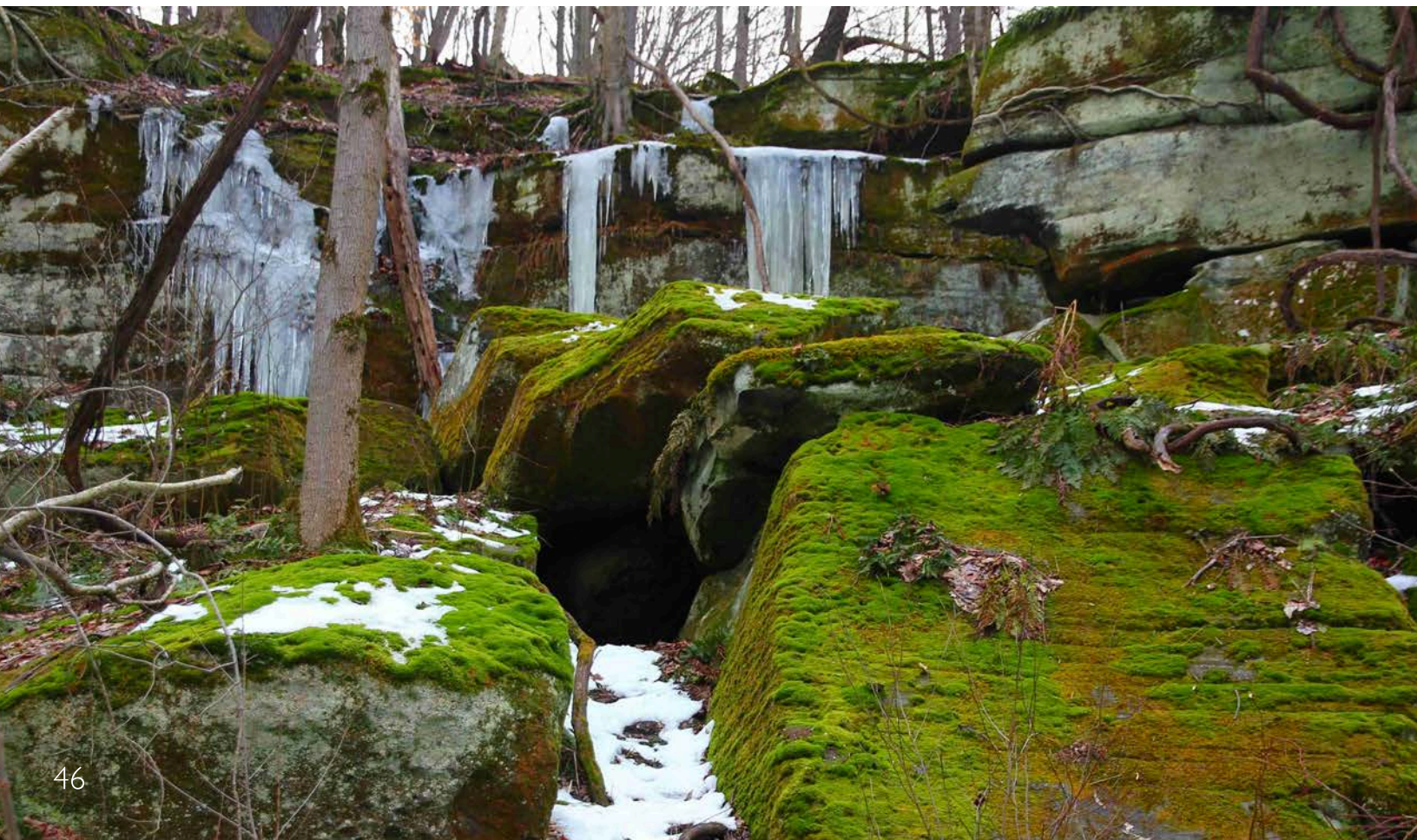
As I follow the trail, the combination of color and tracks creates a layered narrative. The brown of dead leaves, the green of moss, the grey of lichen, and the dark impressions of animal footprints converge into a living canvas. Every hue, every mark, tells a story. The forest floor is a page, and the tracks are sentences, each one offering a glimpse into the daily work of survival, adaptation, and quiet movement that characterizes winter life.

Winter's subtle colors also serve functional purposes. Mosses remain green to retain moisture and support tiny invertebrates; lichens endure harsh temperatures, slowly photosynthesizing; brown leaves decompose to nourish soil for the next growing season. Similarly, the patterns of tracks reveal strategies: deer avoid deep snow where possible, squirrels follow predictable paths, and smaller mammals use cover to navigate safely. The forest is a study in contrasts—soft and hard, bright and muted, motionless and active, all functioning together in a delicate balance.

Standing beside a small creek, I watch ice form along its edges, reflecting sunlight in delicate patterns. Tracks crisscross the snow near the water, where animals search for resources or cross the terrain safely. I realize that both color and movement in winter tell complementary stories. The palette sets the stage; the tracks narrate the action. Without one, the forest would feel incomplete, but together, they offer a full picture of life persisting in quiet, unassuming ways. The snow eventually softens under the rising sun, and some tracks begin to blur. The subtle green of moss glows faintly in the warm light, while the pale yellow of frost-touched leaves glimmers. Even as time alters the scene, new patterns form, new stories emerge, and the forest continues its quiet work. Observing these transient marks teaches a lesson: life is constantly moving, changing, and adapting, even when we cannot see the whole picture at once.

By the time I leave the trail, I carry more than images of color and shape. I carry a sense of attentiveness, a recognition of the small and subtle ways life persists. Winter is not silent, not empty, not dormant. Its palette and its tracks remind me that even in the coldest season, the forest thrives. Every hue and every impression in the snow tells a story of survival, patience, and quiet endurance, waiting for those willing to slow down and observe.

Winter may seem muted to the casual eye, but for those who watch, the forest offers rich lessons: subtlety is powerful, adaptation is constant, and every color, every footprint, is part of the narrative of life that continues despite frost, snow, and time's inevitable passage.





IN AND OUT OF THE SPIRAL

Chris Mosby

When I was a kid, I used to walk into the woods and sit on a steep embankment overlooking a quiet creek. The sky poked through the canopy, slivers of deep azure and the thinnest wisps of clouds between the leaves. Pill bugs tickled my fingers as I dug into the dirt. I let pebbles tumble down and watched the ripples spread along the water. I would lay my head atop the soil, or use a gnarled root as a backrest, and listen to my own breathing. The world was vast and the borders between me and everything else were insignificant.

As a grown man, I often doomscroll. The unctuous slide of modern life, a single slip and you're descending a never-ending tunnel of dopamine rushes and thumb exercises. Ignore the early warnings of arthritis, keep swiping up or down or left or right. Then, the curiously scentless moldering of gray matter as we passively consent to receptor burnout, frying ourselves amid a ceaseless barrage of kitten videos, people tumbling down staircases, dance routines, sophomoric pranks, obviously staged drama, uniformed soldiers sneaking home, movie clips, gender reveal fails, DIY projects that no one could actually do themselves, insipid life advice more trite than any motivational poster, a garbled pile of AI slop—our screens briefly reflecting those glassy visages in the fleeting moment before the next clip begins. Our eyes are maws, our entire existence reduced to a single utility: consume, consume, consume.

Anxiety is free, though. So that's nice. You can get it at any time, delivered straight to your amygdala. You may have it right now. Is your jaw tense? Your tongue flat and firm against the roof of your mouth? A gnawing ache chewing behind your eye and burrowing deeper into your skull? Do you have trouble sleeping? Are you maximizing this moment? Do you grind your teeth? Is this the best you that you can be? Have you hit your KPIs? How's your ROI? You're a brand now. Bootstrap yourself to wealth beyond imagination. Start a podcast. Grow your YouTube channel. Smash that subscribe button. Airbrush your photos. Make unreality your reality. How many followers do you have? Commodify yourself until you're available on Amazon. Consume and be consumed.

If your pesky worrying persists, don't fret (more than you already are). There are medications for that. There are side effects, yes, obviously, but look at the state of you. How else could you escape this spiral?

There's a satisfying crunch as my daughter drops into the snow beside me and a puff of powder coats my face. Her giggle is infectious. She sweeps her arms and legs in semi-circles and then beams with unfettered glee. "I'm an angel," she exclaims. You are, I tell her.

She catches her breath and we both stare into the rolling clouds. We track the dancing flakes as they pirouette. Then a loosely formed clump of snow smacks into my shoulder and my 3-year-old is screeching away, delighted with herself. Her eyes reflect the pallid winter sun.

With your feet on the ground and a tree at your back, snow seeping through your clothes, it is difficult to spiral. You exist as you and nothing else. The sky is free. You must simply look for it.



THE HIKE

B.L. Paige

It's too cold to be outside.

The parking lot by the trailhead is abandoned because everyone knows this. Everyone but him and the hatchback beside him, half covered in snow. Alec pulls on another pair of gloves and climbs out. He's roasting in his layers until he's outside, and then it doesn't feel like he's wearing enough. His breath stings his teeth, each frigid inhale icing his nose hair. He tucks his face into a scarf and makes his way into the park.

The snow crunches beneath his boots, icy prints like a map of the one person crazy enough to brave the frigid January weather. Behr is waiting. He towers over Alec, his dark beard wild and dusty with snow. He looks at home in the forest, tidy in his winter gear while his sunglasses reflect Alec's attempt to wear enough jackets to survive their hike without freezing. Behr hands him a hiking pole and moves ahead, following the signs for the most difficult path in the park. *It'll be an adventure.* Dad's mantra spouted often enough that the brothers have the words tattooed across their wrists. The lines press against Alec's gloves, raised by cold and his own resistance to continue down the icy path. He usually refuses to hike the trails year round. Behr is the most like Dad, willing to endure any weather if it means he can be outside.

Alec stabs his pole into the solid ground and longs for mud. The trails are different in the spring, a cacophony of sound and the verdant scent of mud and moss. It's a tradition for them to meet Dad at the park at first thaw, when the crocus pokes through the leaf litter and frost. Last year a steady downpour soaked through his flimsy layers until he couldn't distinguish between sweat and rain. Dad paused each time they came across an earthworm writhing in the muck, picking up its slimy body and holding it up to his mouth as if he was going to eat it before

placing it safely on the other side. Behr roared with laughter when Alec got his boot stuck in the mud, and freed it from the sink hole as penance. Alec doesn't remember the scenery, only the sound of their voices.

It's just the two of them this time.

The walk is silent, punctuated by the crunch of ice and breath. He watches Behr's confident posture, the steady pace as they traverse the incline. The forest around them sleeps, the trees nothing more than branches. He spots a few birds, a flash of crimson from a red-breasted nuthatch, a quick flicker of a dark-eyed junco, but the ground is quiet, the usual fare of chipmunks and squirrels burrowed away for the season. It's normal for them to call them out, to name the leaves and animals, the shape of clouds or the bright green curl of lichen dusting the hickory bark at his shoulder. Behr knows the names for them all, but he is distracted, unaware of the red-bellied woodpecker perched beside a freshly excavated cavity above their heads. Alec tries to think of what to say, but he doesn't know how to puncture the stillness. Dad would know, offering some quippy observation that would make them both laugh. Alec pulls his coats tighter around his shoulders and puts one foot in front of the other. His boot hits a patch of ice and he's sliding, stabbing the pole down only to find more ice. He stumbles, bracing for a fall when arms grip his shoulders, keeping him upright.

"Alright?"

Alec nods, pulling himself free from Behr's grip without thanking him. He's done this a dozen times, he shouldn't need his older brother to save him. Behr studies him for a moment then turns, continuing up the path.

By the time they reach the top Alec is sweating, and not even the picturesque view of the snow-capped valley is enough to appease his annoyance. He is wasting his day off, spending it succumbing to frostbite when what he wants more than anything is his bed with heaps of blankets. He isn't made for the outdoors, and every step makes him regret everything that took him from his home that morning.

Behr stands at the edge of the switchback for a moment, his breath painting his face in curls of smoke. His nose is red, but white teeth peek through his dark beard as he smiles. Alec scowls, which seems to make him more joyful.

"Cheer up, we're halfway to the top!" With that he turns and starts climbing again. Alec can't guess his mood, the fleeting joy clashing with the oppressive quiet.

He grits his teeth once more and follows.

His thighs burn with every step, his hand leaning hard on his hiking pole. The path narrows as



they creep closer to the top, pocked with tree roots and rivers of loose stone. He grabs on to the young limbs for support, rattling the branches as snow drifts down in tufts to coat his shoulders.

The top of the hill comes abruptly, a crest that smooths into switchbacks winding through a copse of white oak. The floor is a maze of fallen trunks, the frilled polypores coated in dustings of snow. He can almost hear their dad's voice in his ear, the throaty gobble he would shout anytime they found fresh turkey tails sprouting from the exposed heartwood. He swallows the tight feeling, focusing instead on sharp cuts of air in his lungs. Behr continues ahead, oblivious to his struggle.

His brother comes multiple times a week, walking the trails alone. He's asked Alec to join him for months, a weekly litany that he ignored. It isn't that he doesn't want to see him. He does, desperately. But Behr only wants to hike, and his desire to avoid the memory-laden trails outweighs his need for company. Alec can't understand how he can enjoy the forest when it's filled with Dad's shadow, but it is another thing they haven't talked about.

The last month passed with almost no word from Behr, a thing Alec thought he wanted. In the silence he realized he liked having Behr check in, making requests of his time even if Alec turned them down. It's their way, Behr always looking out for him while Alec basked in it without giving anything in return. It was like that with Dad too. Dad taught him to fish and

identify trees by their leaves and Alec took each lesson with a begrudging acceptance, tuning in just enough to show interest. It was only later that he began to appreciate it.

But today is different. It's Behr's birthday, their first without Dad, and Alec won't let him spend it alone. He is the one who asked Behr what he wanted to do, and when Behr told him he wants to take a hike, Alec didn't turn him down.

Behr tromps through the narrow path, breaking to the right into fresh snow.

"Let's stop for a minute."

Alec doesn't want to stop. His face is numb and his chest aches. He wants to suffer his way through the rest of the hike then climb in his car and blast the heat until he has feeling in his fingers again. Instead, he follows him to a bench coated in snow, walking in place while Behr wipes it clean with his gloves. The bench looks over the valley, the wooden barrier stopping just short of a sharp drop. Dad's lessons come back to him, his steady baritone pointing out the chestnut trees bracketing the barrier, the rolling hills with generations of maple standing side by side. Snow hangs off thick ropes of ivy, dangling from the branches like dead snakes. He sits, recovering his breath from the climb and fighting to get his feelings under control.

Behr settles beside him, stretching out his legs until they rest on the wood slats.

"This is my favorite spot."

Alec bites back a sharp comment and takes a breath before he speaks. "Why?"

Behr shrugs. "It just is. Thanks for coming with me today. I almost bailed."

"How come?"

"Didn't feel like it." Behr takes a shuddering breath, releasing it in a puff. "I guess I wanted to let my birthday pass without making a big deal out of it."

"That doesn't sound like you," Alec jokes.

Behr never made a show of his birthday, but Alec made a point of doing something to celebrate it. Last year they sprung Dad from the hospital and took a driving trip through the Blue Ridge Mountains. Dad spent most of the trip asleep, his head resting on Behr's shoulder, but it was something, the three of them riding the rolling hills as the sun rose over the hazy peaks. Alec pulled off at a roadside lookout as color broke across the sky. They supported their dad between them as the light painted the mountains pink and orange.

"It feels wrong. Celebrating without him."

Alec tries to act normal, the inhale, the slow exhale. His chest cracks with the effort.

He is so focused on himself that he doesn't notice at first, the subtle shaking of Behr's shoulders, the sharp gasps beside him. When he realizes, Alec grabs Behr's arm, pulling the giant

into him. Behr's grip sends snow down his coat, but he doesn't move.

Four months had passed since the funeral. Alec had done his best to fill each day to the brim, taking on an extra job to pass the empty hours. And when he had days off, he slept, too tired to do more than shop or the odd load of laundry. Behr seemed the same as always, but maybe he was grieving in his own way, reaching out to Alec, who was too numb to see how he needed him.

"I thought it would help, coming here, showing you this. But it still sucks."

This is the first time Alec has hiked since Dad died and he assumed when the time came, he would endure it alone. Maybe that was why Behr was so insistent. It's fitting that his first time back is in the dead of winter, he doesn't know if he can handle seeing anything green. Maybe Behr feels the same way, comforted by the colorless backdrop. The hike shifts in his memory, until it is the two of them, enduring a painful climb side by side.

"I'm glad we can spend this sucky moment together."

Behr's laugh is soft. "Me too." He wipes his face with a handkerchief from his pocket and straightens. "Did you notice?"

Alec looks out at the white landscape, looking for any clue as to what he is talking about. Behr smiles, shifting to touch the back of the bench. A golden nameplate is hammered into the wood.

For Behr and Alec, a place to rest until the next adventure. - Dad

Now it is Alec that is crushed against his brother, held as they grieve among the winter trees. It's solemn, as if the forest is standing still while they sit on their solitary bench, enduring the worst together.





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