



Western Michigan University  
ScholarWorks at WMU

---

Honors Theses

Lee Honors College

---

4-21-2017

## Wild Freedom

Elizabeth Field

Western Michigan University, emfield1221@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the Fiction Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Field, Elizabeth, "Wild Freedom" (2017). *Honors Theses*. 2864.  
[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses/2864](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/2864)

This Honors Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



*Wild Freedom,  
A Fable*



*Elizabeth Field*

# *Wild Freedom, A Fable*

*Elizabeth Field*

Presented in these pages are hopes, dreams, and possibilities for a more supportive and inclusive future for all life. The ideas presented here provide potential alternatives to current problematic themes in dominant Western thought and will continue to evolve and grow as my understanding does.

I am so grateful to the family, friends, authors, and educators who inspired and supported this project.

## PROLOGUE

My mother died when I was 13 and she took the light with her. The world outside reflected the turmoil I felt inside. It became a very cruel place right before my eyes. So much hate and destruction; war and violence; pain and suffering. Oil spilled, forests burned and fell, lakes and rivers polluted beyond recognition or bone dry. The Great Lakes that shaped my childhood became filled with sewage and poison and death. The very air we breathed was making us sick. The people in power cared more about money and lies than humanity and truth. I no longer felt love, peace, happiness, gratitude, or hope. I spent a lot of time by myself.

It wasn't until I got older that I began to see the signs of hope again, to feel the love, peace, gratitude, and even happiness sometimes. It came in glimpses that made me forget the overwhelming sadness, even if just for a moment or two. I began to understand the pain in myself and others so deeply that there were times when I didn't know how to pull myself out again. I hurt for the trees, and the bugs, and the earth, and the other human beings that my culture was destroying. There had to be another way.



# ZAMA

“Think about every person you know,” my mama says as she pulls the blankets up to my chin and tucks me in. The glow from the hallway softens the hard edges of my dark room and lights up her face.

“Now, send them love, peace, happiness, gratitude, and hope.” Closing my eyes tightly, I do. I repeat this mantra until it becomes a part of me.

“Now, think about all the people you don’t know. And the animals, and the bugs...” She makes her fingers crawl up my arm like a spider. Her tickling fingers make me laugh.

“...and the trees, and the earth beneath our feet. Now send them love, peace, happiness, gratitude, and hope.” I close my eyes so tightly and try to think of every living thing. Even things that are tinier than I can see, even things that have yet to be discovered, and I focus on sending them those feelings.

“Be intentional with everything you do, my love. Somewhere, someone needs that thought.”

She kisses me on the forehead, taps her finger on my nose and says, “Goodnight, my love. Sweetest dreams.”

As her soft figure moves from the darkness into the light of the hallway, I close my eyes and keep thinking of all the people, and the trees, and the earth, and the bugs, sending them all my good thoughts.



## JASON

The motor of the old red truck chugs and coughs as Jeffrey tries to get it started. He gets mad and punches the steering wheel again. In the driveway standing over my black and green Huffy bicycle in my favorite overalls, I feel helpless. I know he has to go to work because he is the only person in our family who can work right now. He tries again, but as the motor starts to turn over, it dies in a sad coughing fit.

“Goddamn it,” he says as he slams the creaky rust-covered door. He makes a kicking motion through the dusty dirt of the driveway as he turns and slides his left hand over his blonde head and down the back of his neck. I look down. I don’t like to see him upset. I open my mouth to say something, but only a tiny squeak comes out.

He walks back toward the two-story faded farmhouse that is covered with peeling white paint. Inside, my sick mom lies in bed, and my dad does everything he can to care for her. I know it’s really hard on him. He hasn’t been the same since she was diagnosed. As soon as I see the screen door close behind Jeffrey, I set my bike down in the driveway and walk over to the rusty red beast. I kick the front bumper.

“Goddamn it.”

# ZAMA

What stories the earth would tell if we only knew how to listen! She is firm beneath my body; a constant support. The summer sun shines warmth onto my face as the wind dances gently through the tall golden wheat around me. Opening my eyes to blue skies freckled with clouds and silhouettes of birds flying beneath the afternoon sun, I feel renewed. Slowly sitting up, I hear the sounds of life surrounding me: birds chirping, leaves rustling, small creatures burrowing and thriving in the dirt and wheat. Taking a deep breath, I stretch, and turn to thank the patch of earth that held me as I rested. Spreading my fingers wide, my hands feel centuries of growth, devastation, and recovery pulsing from the earth through me. We're trying to listen again.

Running back to the village, feeling the ground firm beneath my bare feet with each step, I think of everything that has been and wonder what is to come. The energy from the trees and new and old life in the forest between the wheat field and the road surges outward, raising the hairs on my arms and legs. It feels familiar, but different. No longer do I feel the shadow of impending doom, the threat of industry that once haunted this land. The pieces of trash that littered forest floors in the distant past have now disappeared. Sometimes I still can't believe we have been given a second chance, can't quite grasp that this world we are creating is possible. Our world offers so much for so many diverse people, and everyday we work to make it better. We are constantly questioning our old ways and creating more space for people who felt they didn't belong in the old world to thrive. People like me. We are trying to think beyond binaries and create inclusive systems that truly support everyone in the best possible way. One of the

cornerstones of this effort is Amalya, who does not identify with any particular gender. They was the first person I met when I awoke and my fondness of them has only grown since.

Jumping through the tall grass between a gap in the sturdy oak trees that guard the forest, I land firmly on the ground a stone's throw from the road that has been reclaimed by nature. Green grass and vines of ivy creep around and up through the cracks in the black asphalt. In the village, there have been talks of extending our solar technology to revamping the roads, but we are also still discussing sustainable means of long-distance travel, so we haven't really gotten that far yet. These roads make me happy. They remind me of a not-so-distant past; creating a feeling of nostalgia that allows me to appreciate what has been, and to appreciate what exists now even more. The abandoned, forgotten roads make me feel like I've survived the apocalypse. The discarded pavement is warm and rough beneath my dirty feet. Approaching the village, my mind snaps back into the present.

Amalya stands outside the home where Bryson is currently living, building something, always creating. Dark skin and bright eyes, like smoky stars, light up my entire being.

"Hi! What are you working on?" I say as I run up to them, trying to catch my breath.

"Well, hey there." They smiles and looks up at me with bright, piercing eyes. "It's a new mobile chair for Bryson. This one will be solar-powered. He drew the designs himself."



“That’s incredible!”

I love to watch Amalya work. Smooth, worn hands carving, sanding, and creating so precisely. In the old world, they was an engineer of sorts, designing and building useful things that others would buy. Without a need for currency in our world, their skills create items that benefit our friends and neighbors.

“What kind of adventures are you up to today?” Amalya asks with a smile. Their eyes shine in the sunlight as they wipes the sweat and sawdust from their brow. Their tight, intricate black braids pulled back out of their face into a loose bun.

My breath finally starts to catch up to me.

“I was out resting and reflecting in the wheat field.”

“Ah. One of your favorite places. How is the wheat today? And the trees, and skies, and birds?”

“Still recovering, but I would say they’re at peace with the efforts we are making.” I stroke their warm, sweaty face with my cool hand. “You’re beautiful. I’m off to meet a new client. See you later?”

“Of course. Meet me by the willow tree when the moon has its turn in the sky.” Looking them in their smoky eyes one last time, I smile and nod before turning and bolting for my bicycle, which I left outside the market.

Still bustling with familiar faces smiling, visiting, sharing, gifting, and trading with one another, the market is an open space that could probably fit about 80 of our small houses in it if they stood side-by-side. A huge piece of white solar cloth covers the space, fastened to wooden beams that provide support and pathways for the coils in the

cloth that absorb and transfer energy. People of all ages and all trades gather here daily. Often different faces appear on different days because we take turns with the work that needs to be done beyond the market: on the farms, in the workshops, in the kitchens, and other rethinking and rebuilding efforts. The smells of fresh herbs, produce, and handmade lavender soap mix together to fill my lungs with hope and gratitude. Breathing it all in, I close my eyes and listen to all the diverse voices; some loud and sure, others distant and barely audible, but all of them happy. When I open my eyes again, Zoey rides by on my bicycle.

“Hey!” I laugh and start chasing after her. Zoey is nine and she reminds me of myself when I was that age. Her pale face, freckles, and shiny red ponytail are vibrant and beautiful in the sunlight, almost blinding. She is riding very slowly as the distance between the seat and the pedals causes quite a challenge for her young legs. With great effort, she stops and clumsily gets out of the way of the bike as it falls on its side in the dirt.

“What do you think you’re doing?” My tone is playful. She looks up at me and laughs as the dust cloud created by the falling bike begins to dissipate.

“Nothing,” she says casually. “I see you riding it all the time. I just wanted to give it a try. I don’t know how you do it!”

“Well, my legs are a lot longer than yours, so that helps.”

She shrugs.

“We’ll have to get you one. Then we could go for rides together.”

“Yeah?! Oh, wow. That would be just magnificent.”

The words that come out of Zoey's mouth and the deliberateness of her enunciation make her seem much older than nine. The day she wandered into our space, I couldn't believe it. It was the first time I had seen a child awaken without any parent or guardian. She says she remembers them, but not well. After we started spending more time together, she told me something awful happened to them when she was seven and she had been living the last two years of her life in the old world bouncing around in foster homes. I can't imagine. My mom died when I was young, but not that young. And I at least still had my dad. But to lose both of them and wind up in foster care? I admire the hell out of Zoey.

"I have to go meet a client, but do you want to get together sometime soon?"

"Sure. I'll let Christopher and Darrin know. Would you like them to come too?"

"Only if you want them to." Christopher and Darrin are currently looking out for Zoey. They're good friends of mine, and I love spending time with them, but I know sometimes a kid just needs to be without her primary caregivers.

"OK. I'll think about it and I'll let you know. See you later!" She runs back toward the crowded market and her bouncing red ponytail fades into the yellows, reds, blues, and pinks of the clothes and people underneath the shade of the solar cloth. I grab my bike, hop on, and head out to meet my new client.

I work out of an old building that was probably built at least 100 years ago. Four stories of multiple shades of red and brown bricks reach up toward blue skies. Windows that once cradled panes of glass separating the people inside from the world outside now lay bare to let the sun and the life back in. We utilize a lot of these old spaces, mostly for

the harvesting and storing of solar energy, but as we have reclaimed them in a new way, so has nature. She is much more a part of our lives now. Vines grow up and into our spaces and often bring ants and spiders with them. Entering the building feels like entering a place that has been forgotten; a place that I am not supposed to be. An abandoned building carries its history in its walls. Although this building is not abandoned anymore, aspects of it still feel that way. What happened while we were asleep? When was this building abandoned? What was it used for? Who worked here? Who laughed here and cried here?

Climbing up the stairs to my second floor office, I run my hands along the concrete wall encasing the stairwell, my fingers tracing the blue bleeding graffiti left by someone who had something to say when the building was abandoned. “NO FREEDOM,” it reads.

“Good afternoon, friend,” I say to the black, white, and gold spider who has made her home in the corner of my workspace. Her beauty astounds me each time I see her and I admire the web that I know she takes down and recreates every night. That’s freedom. She is constantly improving and reinventing. I check my watch. It’s 3:00 p.m and my client will be here any moment.



# JASON

When I woke up, I thought I was in hell. Couldn't remember how I got here, didn't know how long I had been asleep. I still don't understand. What is the point of living in a world if I can't make something of myself? If I can't gain respect?

Everything I had, everything I built, is gone and there is no way for me to get it back. I woke up with nothing. Didn't even recognize myself in a mirror; unshaven, dirty, and penniless. I have so many questions, and no one seems to have answers. It's like the world, the people, just started over.

I remember what it used to feel like to make a big sale. Seeing the numbers in my accounts rise. There was nothing that I couldn't buy. No one that I couldn't tell what to do, nothing that I couldn't control.

“Mr. Williams, sir, your wife is on line one for you.”

“Thank you, Abigail.” As she nods in response, her eyes peek above the rim of her black-framed glasses and she disappears from the room as the door closes. The things I'd like to do to her. How she taunts me with that sexy white shirt unbuttoned just far enough, tucked into that tight skirt that lands just above her knees.

“Hello?”

“Hi honey, didn't Abigail tell you it was me calling?”

She sounds like she's having trouble breathing. She's sniffing and her voice is shaking.

“Oh. Um yeah. Sorry it’s just been a busy day over here.”

“Well, I’m...” she pauses and sounds like she’s gasping for breath. “I’m sorry for bothering you.”

Is she crying? What the hell could be wrong this time?

“It’s fine. What’s going on?”

“I just... everything isn’t OK. I... I have something to tell you when you get home.”

When I found this place, they gave me a home. Some sort of council was held to determine where I would stay. I was encouraged to speak, but I didn’t really have anything to say. I have access to food and clean water, but the best part is the beer I get from a local brewer. It’s a lot easier to cope with being nothing when you don’t feel anything. The man who showed me to my little shack said I should talk to someone named “Zama,” that she could probably help me with adjusting or something. He insisted, so I let him set something up. I’m supposed to meet her today.

I should probably start heading that way if I’m going to go.

I’m not going. I don’t belong in this new world. I don’t belong and some woman is not going to help. There are a few bottles of beer left. I’m grabbing them and heading down to the river on foot.

## ZAMA

The night is warm, clear and calm. The moon and stars illuminate the earth in a soft blanket of diffused light. The wind caresses my face and blows through my hair as I'm riding to meet Amalya. Words cannot describe the joy of being in their presence after the sun goes down.

They stands under our sacred tree waiting for me. Their braids fall over their shoulders and I long to pull them back and kiss their neck. Their skin and eyes are even more beautiful in the moonlight; the light and shadows from the blowing willow branches chasing each other over their dark skin. The steady bubbling of the creek is calming and seductive.

Parking my bike and walking over to them, the soft grass and solid earth grounds every single step, pulling me into this moment.

"Hey," I say biting my lip and smiling.

"Hey." Their tone so rich and inviting. I brush their hair back with my hand and kiss them deeply. "Did somebody miss me today?"

"Of course," I say smiling.

"How did it go with your new client?"

"He didn't show." Silence except for the crickets and the steady bubbling of the creek.

"How is Bryson's chair coming along?"

"It's coming. I should have it done in the next couple days. Then maybe we can take it for a test drive." They gently nudges me and caresses my arm.

“That sounds amazing.” I feel so calm in Amalya’s presence. Everything makes sense when we are together.

They takes my hand and leads me out from under the weeping branches and into the open field illuminated by the waking moon.

“Come here,” they says, beckoning to the deepest parts of my body and soul. We lie down on the earth and look up at the night sky, a sky so clear and full of so many stars. I can’t believe how lucky I am. The world has changed and I am a part of that change, and Amalya, this beautiful human, is here with me. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, I lean my head onto their shoulder, squeezing their hand tightly. Tears falls from my eyes. I close them gently and send good thoughts to everyone I know and everyone I don’t know. Amalya’s fingers laced with mine, our bodies so close, my body is at peace, but my mind starts to wander... who is this man and why didn’t he show?





## JASON

A black man in a wheelchair wheels up to the front of the small crowd outside the market. He looks intelligent with his black-rimmed glasses and purple sweater over a button-up.

“Hello!” he says. “Welcome, everyone.” The crowd of about 12, including myself, starts to quiet down. “Thank you for being here today. Our community is thrilled to officially welcome you, to show you around, and to try to answer any questions you may have.”

I stand in the back and try to avoid making eye contact. I don’t even know why I came.

“I’m sure many of you have questions,” the man continues. “I will do my best to answer them, or at least point you in the direction of someone who may be able to better answer them. For starters, my name is Bryson and I have been awake and living in this community for about six months now. A lot of us aren’t really sure what happened or how long we were asleep, but it seems much of the world we knew was gone when we woke up and we were given a second chance.”

Great. He knows about as much as I do. This might be hell.

“So, what we are trying to do here,” he goes on, “is to build the world that we all want to live in. To recreate and improve all the things that were good in the world we once knew, and to rethink the things that weren’t so great.”

We’re definitely on separate pages. If that is the goal of this place, I would say our ideas of what’s good are far from similar. I knew I shouldn’t have come. I’m done.

“Excuse me.”

I hear it, but I keep walking away, hoping I didn’t hear it. Hoping the sweet, inviting voice was not directed at me.

“Excuse me, hey.” A hand touches my left shoulder from behind and I instinctively jerk away and look back simultaneously. Her eyes are a mix of green and gray, her gaze is determined, almost fierce. Looking at her makes me feel uncomfortable.

“What?” The sound of my voice makes me realize how irritated I am. My tone alarms her and she takes a step back.

“Oh, um, I’m sorry to have grabbed you like that.” She pauses and looks down. The sunlight shines on her dark brown hair. “I just haven’t seen you around here before, which makes sense considering this is a sort of orientation to our new setup, but I, uh... I noticed you were leaving before we really even got started.”

“Yeah. I’m not feeling well,” I lie. My tone is firm, but less irritated.

“Oh. Yeah, of course, I didn’t even think...” She sounds so apologetic. “Feel better.”

She sounds and looks like she really hopes I do. Turning around, walking away from the crowd and the woman with the dark brown hair, I picture her still standing there. Still waiting and reaching for me. When I turn to look over my left shoulder, she’s gone.

## **BRYSON**

The faint sound of hammering outside the window beckons me out of my deep sleep, rising through layers of dreams that ignite questions about what life was like before I woke up here. The process is different for everyone, but trying to come to terms with who I was and who I am now remains somewhat of a challenge. There is a sense of freedom that feels unfamiliar to me in this environment. It's nice to feel that I have the freedom to be whoever I really am here, but who is that? I've decided that something really traumatic must have happened to me in the old world, because I remember the pain that I felt, but it's all scrambled and out of focus.

The hammering continues beyond the window and I realize it is likely Amalya working on my new chair. I'm excited to see what they will do with the plans I came up with. That's one thing I do remember about the old world: creating and planning and the anticipation that comes with seeing how another person brings those plans to fruition. There are always little surprises in the interpretation, and that's what makes the finished product so valuable: the marks that each individual leaves.

Allowing my eyes to adjust to the light spilling in through the window, I slowly bring myself to a sitting position, stretch, and scoot myself over to the left side of the bed where I leave my chair at night. Finding my glasses on the bed-side table, I put them on. The room is transformed from slightly blurry edges to much sharper ones. I make sure the brakes on my chair are set and use the strength of my arms to transfer myself from the soft gray sheets to the chair. I'm not sure how long my body was inactive before I woke up in this new world, but everyday I feel the strength returning more and more.

Slowly, still adjusting to being awake, I reach my hands down to the cold metal rims around my wheels and start turning them, pushing down in consistent motions through the hallway and to the front door. Opening the door to a world full of morning dew and mist, a planet still waking. Leaning my head on the door frame, I see Amalya kneeling down with their back to me, focusing intently on whatever their hands are holding.

“Good morning,” I say. The raspiness in my voice matches the thick fog that surrounds the street and homes that I know are there, but can barely see. Amalya turns toward me gracefully and I think I can make out a smile.

“Good morning,” Amalya replies in a calm, inviting tone. “I hope I didn’t wake you. I woke from a dream that inspired me and didn’t want to go back to sleep.”

There is something about Amalya that I have never witnessed in anyone else: mystery and freedom, joy and understanding, hope and love, all at once. Wheeling down the ramp and over to their set-up, I can feel the cool wetness from the dewy grass on my hands. It brings me into this moment, into Amalya’s eyes, into my heart. My hands grab the wheels, stopping me right in front of the beauty and truth that is Amalya. My heart beats hard as it sends blood pumping through my body, the sound echoes in my ears. Amalya feels it too. Still kneeling, Amalya reveals what had captured their focus moments before. A tiny bird rests in the comfort of their worn palms, its feathers fuzzy and newly formed. All three of us trembling, Amalya rests their hands on top of my wet hands covered with blades of grass and we become one.

## ZAMA

The surface of the river ripples and plays in the sunlight. Reflections of trees and the sky above them dancing happily on the flowing water. Laying on the side of the bank close enough to reach the water, I tap my fingers lightly to break through the surface and feel the gentle coolness of the living being and the life it sustains. Imagining the river as time and life flowing eternally, I am suddenly overcome. Embracing the urge with all of me I roll into the river completely submerging my body, letting go so I am swept into the slow and steady current.

Coming up for air, I feel the sun and warm summer air on my face. I am surprised to see a large brown furry spider gliding on the surface of the water beside me.

“Well, hello friend!” I manage to say between breaths after the initial shock of it being so close to my face. I was quite afraid of spiders in my old life, but my awakening has given me a greater understanding and respect for them, although the eight-legged creatures still startle me from time to time.

My new friend seems to acknowledge me with a flick of one of its legs as it glides back toward the shore and I continue swimming and moving with the flow down the river. Kicking my legs every now and then to keep my body afloat, I lay near the surface, my face above the water and arms extended outward. Eyes closed, I bask in the warmth from the sun and trust the river to guide and support me. All sense of time is lost as the moving water flows in and out like the trickling thoughts in my head.

“Oh shit. Hey! Hey!”

The sound of a man's frantic voice bursts my bubble of sunlight and smooth spilling water. Opening my eyes, I pick up my head and turn to see a man running from the sandy bank into the river toward me. Seeing that I am alive and alert he stops, standing in the river about knee-deep. Taking control of my body again, I push my legs down to stand in the waist-deep water that surrounds me.

"Jesus, you OK?" His chest is heaving and he bends over, his hands on his thighs, looking up at me with his head turned upward into the sun. I know this face.

"Yeah. I was just going for a swim, or a float, I guess." Looking around, I realize I don't know this part of the river very well. Much of this area has been left to the wilder parts of us and this makes me happy.

"Well, what are you smiling about? You really scared me." He exhales, shakes his head, turns and starts walking back toward the bank.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean..." Following after him, the water gets shallower and shallower. Looking up as I approach the beach, I see brown glass bottles on the sand. He walks up and sits down next to them.

As my feet step out of the flowing river of time and life and onto the ancient sun-baked sand, I feel an undeniable urge to understand this man. Squeezing my hair and shirt and watching the water droplets fall and darken the dry sand, I slowly approach him. His eyes are a pale blue in the sunlight and they refuse to look at me. His hair a sandy-colored mess that looks like curls that had been controlled for years have been set free again. His skin is light, but tanned by the summer sun. His gray shirt cut

off at the shoulders, exposes his strong and lightly freckled arms. His wet ankles and feet covered in sticky dry sand.

“I’m sorry,” I say again as I walk up and sit down next to him, but not too close. “You’re the guy who I accosted the other day, yeah? Are you feeling any better?”

“Not really,” he says slowly and intentionally, looking up beyond the river, with his knees up, arms crossed and resting on them, a brown bottle in his right hand.

“I’m Zama,” I say looking at him as he stares off. He lets out a short irritated laugh.

“Of course you are.”



## JASON

Sitting in the car in the driveway with my hands on the wheel staring at the white front door with the stained glass window that made my Jenny fall in love with the house, I know I don't want to go in. Don't want to know why she was crying, not ready for whatever she has to tell me. Raindrops fall from the gray sky and splatter and run on the windshield.

Our life used to be so different. The sex was good. We were happy. We got married, bought a house. We were living the dream. I don't know what happened. Sitting with my face in my hands listening to the low murmur of the radio, I revert back to that helpless little boy in overalls. Can still see Jeffrey walking back to the house, walking away from me and out of my life forever. It hurt at first, but the pain doesn't bother me anymore. I showed him. Made something of myself, became someone he could never be. Wonder if the old farmhouse is still standing.

A tapping that is harder than the rain on the car window brings me back. It's Jenny looking down at me, her dirty blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun, the skin around her blue eyes red and puffy, and all of her getting wet from the rain. Slowly move my left hand toward the switch to roll the window down as the rain pours in, hitting my arm.

"How long have you been sitting out here?" Jenny says, her voice barely audible above the sound of the rain hitting the car.

"Just uh.... I was just getting ready to come in."



She looks past me, gives a slow nod, and turns back toward the house, slowly and methodically coming up the walkway we had laid and landscaped last fall to the front door that she left open for the rain to blow inside. She seems completely unaffected by the rain, almost unaffected by everything, an empty shell of a person.

I push the button that brings the window back up, grab my briefcase from the floor in front of the passenger seat and throw it up over my head to keep me dry. Opening, stepping out, gently closing the door to my silver Mercedes, I hit the lock on my remote as I scramble up the walkway and steps to the front door in the sideways rain.

Setting my briefcase inside the door and closing it behind me, I stand in front of the stained-glass window on the door looking at the wetness on the dark walnut wooden floor. Bringing my gaze up into the dining room, I see Jenny sitting in a chair facing away from me, the evidence of raindrops still dark and wet on her beige sweater. Walking up behind her, I place my left hand on her shoulder. She doesn't acknowledge me. Pulling the chair out next to her, I sit down while reaching for her hands that lie folded in front of her on the table. Her hands are cold and wet and water drips from her hair and face.

“Jesus, Jenny. What's wrong?”

She stares ahead, still not acknowledging my presence, her hands not responding to my touch.

“I don’t know how to say this, so I’ll just say it,” she says slowly and distantly, like her mind is someplace else. She pauses and continues to stare ahead without focusing on anything. Her lips part and she takes a shallow breath in.

“I found out I was pregnant a few weeks ago.” Her words fill me with questions and confusion. I don’t understand. I try to say something, but like when I was eight standing over my bicycle in the driveway, the words won’t come out.

“I was going to wait until things were better between us to tell you, but I guess that doesn’t matter now. I lost it.”

I can feel her staring at me. This strange woman who thinks playing pranks on people is funny. I really thought her body was lifeless and in trouble in the river. Of course this is the woman who I was supposed to meet with, who I have been successfully avoiding until I call out and run to her. Isn’t that just ironic as hell. Shaking my head, I let out a laugh and tip my head back to finish the last sip in this bottle. Her eyes are off me for a second, but soon I feel them again.

“What do you want?” I say as I look out to the river, avoiding her face. The sun reflecting off the water makes me squint. She hesitates. Her eyes move from the side of my face down to the sand and out toward the river.

“I guess I just want us to know and understand each other,” she says casually. My eyes slowly move from beyond the river down to the sand and up to the side of her face. She is rather attractive in the sunlight, when she isn’t eyeing me. She continues to look

forward, but I know she can feel me staring. Moving my gaze back downward, I see goosebumps on her arms.

“Do you want a beer?” I ask before thinking. I quickly glance over to make sure I still have one to offer her. Looking back at her, I see a smile start to creep across her face.

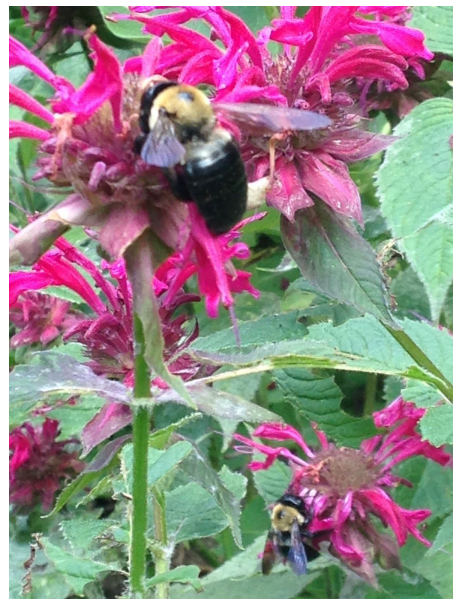
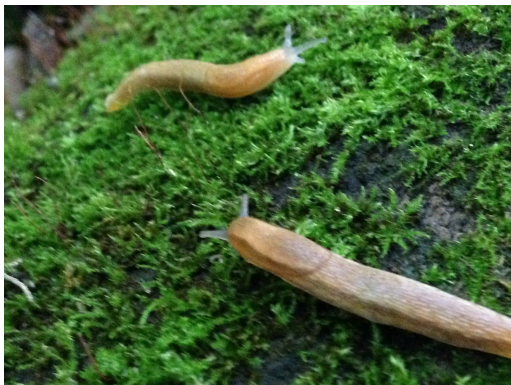
“Sure.”



# AMALYA

We are one. The humans and creatures and earth that in the past have been defined as separate beings are one once again. Like before the rise of the West, before the domination of the land and its peoples and all living beings, we are together again. Listening and talking, and truly hearing and seeing. During the time of destruction and domination, we almost lost hope, but love endured and we survived to rebuild.

We exist as diverse and unique parts of a beautiful living whole. We still remember our old ways of thinking, but have been reawakened to something bigger, something deeper. The change has not been easy for all of us, but we are supporting each other and learning. Putting the earth first, seeing ourselves as part of the complex systems and not master to them provides the key to our new beginning. In learning ways of knowing that had been intentionally squashed, squandered, and stolen for profit, we attempt to recreate what was lost to some long ago by rooting ourselves in the earth through our ancient elders' wisdom.



## BRYSON

Sitting on the forest floor, leaning against an ancient tree rooted deeply in the earth, I allow myself to melt into it, into the dirt beneath me and the sturdy bark behind me. How long has this tree stood here among others in this forest? What has it witnessed? Why was I drawn to this one more than the others?

This is the second time I've come to meditate with and upon this tree, but this time, I didn't want to do it alone. I've asked Amalya to meet me here. I'm hoping they will arrive soon. They brings so much calmness and clarity to my swirling mind. There are still so many things that I don't understand about who I used to be and who I am.

I hear something. It sounds like buzzing. I feel short bursts of wind on my face. I open my eyes to see a tiny brown and green shimmering hummingbird freeze just inches away from my face, staring at me. Really seeing me and being present in this moment with me. I can see its tiny face and black, beady eyes. I am overcome by the beauty and presence of this fragile creature. As quickly as it appeared, it flies off. I hear another sound: a kind of rustling in the distance. I turn my head to the left to see Amalya carefully heading toward me, intentionality and precision in each step.

"Hi Bryson," they says, smiling as they leans on the tree with their right arm. They whispers something that I can't quite hear to the tree and lowers themselves to their knees on the forest floor next to me.

"Hey Amalya, you won't believe what I just saw. It was a hummingbird! It stopped right in front of my face and looked into my eyes, almost... into my soul, really," I say, barely being able to get the words out. I am so excited and overwhelmed.

“That sounds incredible,” Amalya says smiling. “It sounds like you are one step closer to seeing and understanding yourself through nature’s eyes.”

Smiling and shaking my head, I look up at them, over the rim of my glasses.

“I guess so,” I say. “One step at a time.”

Amalya doesn’t say anything. Just smiles and slowly sits, leaning against the tree next to me. They slowly and smoothly reaches their hand outward toward mine and our fingers intertwine. The peace and love that comes from their touch surges outward through every part of me.

“There are so many things I still don’t understand,” I say. “About myself, about this world, about the world before.”

“It will come in time. Don’t worry about things beyond your understanding now, Bryson. You will understand them when you are ready to,” Amalya says, calm and sure of it.

“Tell me about the world before this one,” I say, desperately hoping to find some lost piece of myself to hold onto. Amalya takes a deep breath in and exhales.

“It was very broken,” they says, looking out into the forest. “The dominant culture in our country was one of selfishness and greed. Many people didn’t really understand or care about other people or nonhuman beings. They didn’t know how to. The tools were lost, the connections severed; the ways of being were devalued and replaced by a culture of lies and hate that benefited mostly white men.”

“What was the name of our country?” I ask. The feelings evoked from Amalya’s description are familiar, but I can’t recall the details.

“Our country was called the United States,” they says, turning their gaze toward me. “During our lifetime, we were surrounded by ideologies that told us we were the freest country in the world. But in truth, inequalities among races, genders, classes, sexualities, abilities, and nonhuman beings were central to societal structures and everyday interactions. The very land we live with and through and from now had been stolen from people who understood value, reciprocity, and gratitude, and commodified by the colonizers who did not understand. The culture of white male domination and capitalism was built on the backs of people of color, and women, and nonhuman beings like animals and trees. There was no gratitude; only money to be made and human and nonhuman resources to be exploited.”

“Maybe that explains why I don’t remember much of it. It sounds terrible,” I say, feeling sad that I still have yet to feel any lost piece of myself returning.

“There was a lot of pain and suffering, but it wasn’t all bad. There were people like us, after all,” Amalya smiles, squeezing my hand and looking deep into my eyes, into my heart.

“Do you remember how that world ended?” I ask as I break eye contact and look away, out into the forest again. The forest filled with thousands of trees free to breathe and give again.

“Kind of,” Amalya says as their eyes also move away from my face and out toward the trees again. “I remember the climate was changing drastically. Storms and floods kept getting worse and worse. At first, they were impacting those who had nothing to do with the the industries that were affecting the change, but as the severe weather

continued, it seemed to become more selective. Like a drastic and intentional form of natural selection that began taking out the businesses that created the angry climate with their pollution and carelessness.” They pauses and I see their head tilt downward.

“I don’t remember much after that. A flash of white. I’m not even sure how much time had passed, but I woke up and the world was just different. It felt different, like the time of greed and domination was over, and the earth was beginning to heal. We were beginning to heal. I was among the first group to awake, a group of mostly elders who remembered the ways that were almost forgotten in the old world. We held a council expressing thanks to the earth and the sky and all its beings and we began to rebuild in a way that celebrated and listened to the earth and all its inhabitants. A way of gifting and gratitude and connection and simplicity.”

“It’s a remarkable story, really. The way you tell it.” I begin to realize that maybe my connections to my old self aren’t so important. What matters is being in this moment here and now and being grateful for it. Being grateful for the trees and the dirt and the hummingbird and Amalya.





## ZOEY

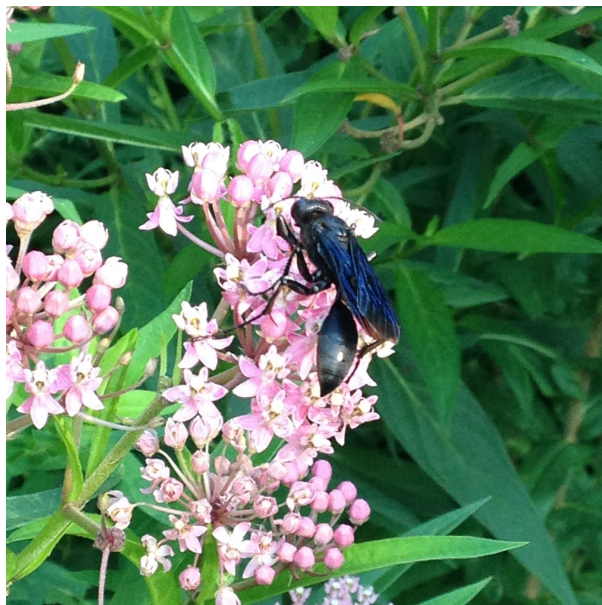
School is a lot different than it used to be, if you can even call it school now. There is a lot more freedom and asking questions and spending time outside. I remember how it used to be. Sit in a classroom at a desk all day, with just a little bit of time for lunch and outside play—recess it was called. I remember girls and boys being told to do things differently and separate and boys being treated different than girls. The teacher always called on them more even though I knew the answer and always raised my hand. I got in trouble when I just blurted out the answer, but the boys never did. What is the point in raising my hand if I never get called on?

Things are different now. My class is a bit smaller, but more kids wake up and join sometimes. We're all different ages. We meet in different places, like the market and the forest and the fields. We get gifts from the land and we thank it. We have many teachers, some old and some young and everything in between. We get to play and ask questions and have fun and be free. We listen to stories from the people called elders. I like that. I close my eyes and listen and imagine pictures of what they are describing in my head. Some kids ask where the TVs are, they ask about video games, and other things that kids used to do in the old world. I don't really miss those things though. I'd rather read or play outside or spend time with other people. People like Christopher and Darrin.

When I woke up here, I was really confused and couldn't remember much. They were the first people I met and we just kind of clicked. I liked them right away. The more questions they asked and the more we talked, the more I remembered. I asked if I could

stay with them. They were much kinder and more caring than some of the foster parents I stayed with after my parents died. For a while, I thought maybe they would wake up here too, my parents, but I guess it doesn't work like that. I feel them in the wind and the trees and the river sometimes.

A council was held among the people in my new community and everyone decided that I could stay with Christopher and Darrin. They were really happy and excited to invite me into their home. Many people in the community did not know each other in the world before, but Christopher and Darrin did. They have been together for a very long time, like more than 30 years. They are both in their 50s. They told me about some of the awful things people used to say and do to them because they were two men together. I think I can understand why. The way they treated boys and girls in my old school, I guess it makes sense that people wouldn't want two boys together like that. But things are different now. We are not separated into boys and girls, or anything like that. We are celebrated for exactly who we are and free to become whoever we want to be.



## ZAMA

Sipping on the warm beer from the brown bottle that has probably sat in the sunlight for hours, I continue to study this closed-off man as he stares out toward the flowing river. His smooth curls and young face with sandy stubble growing back in tell me that he might have been happy once, that maybe there was a time when he was younger and carefree, running around smiling and laughing with curls bouncing.

“This beer isn’t bad,” I say, trying to make some sort of connection as I shift my gaze from his face to the bottle. “Thanks.” Silence except for the rippling river and occasional crow voicing its opinion to the open sky.

“You bet,” he says, looking down and away from me. “A guy named Darrin gave it to me. He brews it. You know him?” He looks at me and our eyes meet for a brief second. Pale crystal blue eyes.

“Yeah,” I say smiling and looking away again. “He makes great beer. Have you met Christopher or Zoey?”

“No,” he says, pausing like he wants to say more. He sighs. “As you can probably tell, I’d rather not interact with people unless I have to.”

“I have noticed that about you,” I say as I let out a short laugh. “Had you not been looking at the river when I floated by, you might have avoided this interaction all together.” I’m joking, but I know he probably wishes with every ounce of his being that he hadn’t seen me and called out.

“Yeah,” he says, defeated. He brings his left hand up to his head and runs it over his sandy blonde hair and down to his neck.

“Look, I don’t expect anything from you. I don’t...” I pause in thought, trying to find the right words. “I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable or force you into anything that you’re not ready for. I’m sure this has been an overwhelming adjustment to have to make and I just want to help if I can.” I don’t really know what he is thinking about or how he feels, but I feel what I said is valid and I will not apologize for it. I look over at him, partly to see if my words had any impact and partly to make sure he is still there. He is. He looks confused and yet, satisfied; he smiles.

“Thanks,” he says. And he looks at me, really looks into my eyes for longer than a fleeting second. “You’re pretty direct, huh? Is it that obvious that I hate it here?”

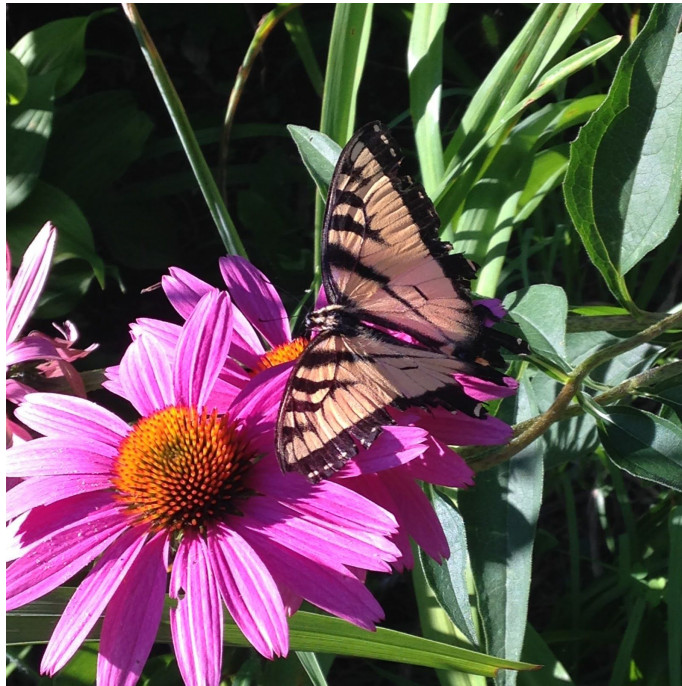
I stop and try to imagine how he feels. Try to imagine hating this world that I find so much beauty and freedom in. I think about all the beings that suffered in the world before. They suffered to make this man and others like him happy, a shallow happiness built on the backs of others who were more beautiful than he could ever imagine. I shake my head as tears start forming in my eyes.

“I want to understand you, I do,” I say, my voice trembling through the tears. “But you have to try to understand me too. Maybe you think the world before was better because you were successful in it. But that success came at a price that was paid by the suffering of so many. Can you see that?” My chin resting on my knee, I look up and over at him.

His left hand still at the base of his neck, he turns his head away from me and looks out toward the river. He doesn’t say anything.

## THE ELDERS

The council held at the edge of the wild flower field and the forest among the trees and the dirt and the grasses and the flowers represent the joining of realms that were separated in recent history, but are together once again. We express gratitude to the earth and its beings for giving its gifts of sustenance and protection, companionship and beauty. We welcome all humans to learn the lost languages of the earth and its many native peoples; the language of sharing and gratitude, peace and love, hope and happiness, and true wild freedom. We challenge those who once thrived in capitalism to question their motives, to give ancient ways of understanding a try, to attempt to rekindle the connection that has been lost; the connection to other humans and nonhumans, to rivers and lands and the earth itself. We are all connected and dependent upon each other. We are one.



## JASON

She sits next to me trembling. Part of me wants to reach out to comfort her, but I know that's not enough. Although I don't really understand it, I know she is crying because of me. Zama. What kind of name is that, anyway? I look away from her tanned trembling skin and look back out to the river. As much as I have been in bitter denial, I can't help but acknowledge how visually appealing this new world seems to be. There was natural beauty in the old world, but there is something different about the freedom of it in this world. The sun is beginning to set and the colors in the sky are unlike any I've ever seen, vibrant and delicate, like a painting.

"Maybe you're right," I say. "There certainly is beauty in this world that I haven't been acknowledging." Still holding my nearly empty bottle in my right hand I gesture toward the sky and wait for a response. She doesn't say anything, but wipes the tears from her cheeks and looks at me.

"I think you're right about me too," I say looking away from her. "I didn't think about anyone but myself because I didn't have to. I was a successful, rich businessman. I earned it and I burned a lot of bridges in the process. But that was the American dream." She keeps looking at me, studying me.

"Does it feel good to be able to talk about it like this?" she says, still studying me.

Huh. I guess it does. I never really reflected on it before, that's just the way it was. Especially as a man. I didn't talk about things—I did them.

"Yeah, it does," I say. "Why were you crying? I still don't understand."

"Well, it might be hard to explain, but I want to try. Are you willing to listen?"

Of course I am, I asked didn't I? Why would I ask if I wasn't? I take a breath and look away, trying to dig deeper than my initial reaction. Really listen.

"OK, yeah," I say and try to open my ears and mind.

"The old world was really hard for me," she pauses and looks around. "It was really hard for a lot of people. Money was valued more than people, and because of that, denying people's basic needs was justified, and humans and nonhumans were commodified and exploited. That's not how things always were, and that's not how they had to be, those were just excuses to keep people powerless and inactive, and to keep people like you in power, believing that because the system worked for you, it could work for everyone, shifting the blame from those broken, abusive systems to the powerless."

I don't really understand, but I can tell she knows and believes what she is talking about. I guess I never really thought about capitalism that way. It seemed so promising, it was so promising; I was able to create endless wealth for myself, but I didn't think about it being at the expense of others. I guess I didn't really care.

"Why didn't I ever realize this or care about it?" I'm not sure if I am asking her or myself.

"You weren't socialized to do so," she says matter-of-factly. "And you were surrounded by media and people, ideas and discourses that told you it wasn't your responsibility to care. Many people were disconnected from each other, they too had forgotten how to care. It's not necessarily your fault. You weren't given the tools that you needed. I didn't always have them either. Well, I mean I think I did, I think we all did."

They were just forgotten or we were distracted from them, surrounded by lies that told us we didn't need them anymore. Does that make sense?" She looks over at me. The setting sun illuminates her face and green-and-gray-speckled eyes in an orange and pink glow.

"Yeah, I think it does," I say. And I really do. I've never felt this kind of connection with a person before. Never been able to put words to some of the things that made me unhappy in the old world. Things that maybe even drove Jenny and me, and me and my family apart. Maybe whatever thread from the old world that I'm holding onto isn't even what I thought it was.

"I just..." I struggle with forming the words. "I just feel like I don't belong in this world. I'm not like you. I think it was a mistake that I woke up." I need another beer. I look over to the pile of empty brown bottles pointing in different directions that cast hollow shadows on the sand. There is one unopened one left. Thank Darrin, bless him. I grab it and pop it open. I feel gratitude, feel outside myself, feel the sand between my toes, the energy from Zama sitting next to me as the sun gets closer and closer to the horizon.

"Do you want to share this?" I offer. She smiles and nods.

"I think you'd be surprised just how alike we are underneath it all. Underneath our past selves and ideas, underneath our flesh and blood, we're not so different, you and I," Zama says as her left hand reaches toward the beer I am offering to her. I see a bracelet on her wrist that I hadn't noticed before. It's mesmerizing. Looks like the earth itself with browns and greens and tiny flowers.



“Tell me about that,” I say pointing to it as the beer transfers from my hand to hers.

“Ah. This is a gift, from each of the individual plants who offered themselves for it to be created, and from Amalya,” her face and eyes light up when she says this name.

“Who is Amalya?” I ask. She smiles.

“A very, very beautiful soul. You will have to meet them someday when you are ready to interact with more people.” She keeps smiling, so warm and inviting.

“Them? How many people are we talking about here?” I ask, slightly confused by her answer.

“Oh, right. Amalya is just one person. They doesn’t identify with a particular gender. That is another aspect that is quite different here and may take some getting used to. Perhaps you didn’t realize this in the old world, but the dominant culture’s outlook on sex, gender, and sexuality, among other things, was exclusive and limited. Humans need to be comfortable and free in their own bodies, so our understanding is quite different here.”

Whoa. This is some kind of culture shock. Questioning things I didn’t even think were questionable. Honestly, if I hadn’t been given this opportunity to view a different world, I doubt I would have even accepted this idea in the old one. I can almost feel the gears in my mind turning, shifting, like I’m starting to wake up.

I look at Zama and she is already looking at me, like she can sense the gears in my head beginning to turn too. I can feel pieces of the wall I’ve built around myself starting to crumble.

“But, back to the bracelet,” she says. “Gifts are really important here. Have you ever given a gift?”

“Yeah, of course. I got my wife an engagement ring when I proposed and I bought her a house after we got married,” I say. Very proud of my thoughtfulness. She looks at me, unimpressed. I think she can see that I am pleased with myself.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she says. “No offense, but those things, no matter how extravagant, weren’t really gifts. They were more of exchanges. A gift is something you make and give without expecting anything in return,” she pauses and looks at me, searching my face for understanding. “Why did you buy your wife an engagement ring?”

What a ridiculous question, why did I buy my wife an engagement ring... but then, why did I? Why did I really?

“Well, I wanted to marry her and that’s what you did when you wanted to marry someone. You bought them a ring and you proposed,” I say.

“Exactly. You were following a script. A script that told you several things: that you were supposed to get married to a woman for starters, and that in order to do that, you had to buy her a ring and propose, right?”

That is right. That’s exactly right. I never questioned doing it, because it was just what you did.

“Yeah,” I say. “I did love Jenny though. I still do.” Zama looks at me.

“Do you remember what happened to her? Before the flash?” She asks.

I do remember. The last thing I remember was that day in the rain. Her hair dripping, her eyes vacant, her light gone.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” I say. Fearing I’m wearing the very thoughts I’m afraid to share on my face, I look back out to the river. The faint orange light casts shadows of trees that reach toward Zama and me, and I feel an urge to walk amongst them, to start walking and never return.

“OK,” she says, but I’m already miles away. “It’s getting late, do you want to walk back to the village with me?”

“Sure.”



## BRYSON

I think of my time with Amalya and the hummingbird in the woods often. Although it was a grounding and awakening moment for me, I still can't help but feel there is more I need to learn about my past in order to truly appreciate and understand my present. I continue to meditate and try to remember, but these efforts usually end in frustration. Amalya says it could be because I am trying too hard with expectations that are too specific. They is probably right, but I just can't help it.

Today I am heading over to the south side of the village to spend some time with Zama. Amalya thought it might be helpful for me to spend some more time with her. I know she works out of an old building out that way, but I've never been to it. I'm not very familiar with that part of the village yet. I'm finishing up getting dressed when I hear a knock at my front door.

"Coming!" I yell as I finish buttoning my shirt. I start wheeling toward the door, reach it, and open it to find Amalya and Zama standing outside with a gorgeous, glistening, solar-powered chair between the two of them. It's decorated with green leaves, vines, grass, and flowers, a small basket of wild fruits and vegetables hanging off one of its sides. I look up at Amalya and then Zama, both of them beaming with excitement, thrilled to be giving this gift to me.

"It's perfect!" I say, barely able to contain my joy and gratitude. I feel tears forming in my eyes. I am so humbled by this gracious offering. "Thank you, thank you," I say, my voice trembling.

The three of us embrace, hearts pounding and smiling. This is what life is all about.

“I want you to know, I fought the urge to test drive it on the way over here,” Zama jokes. “It was tough, but the first ride should be yours.” She smiles.

“Thanks,” I laugh, lifting my glasses to wipe the tears from my cheeks. “Oh Amalya, it’s more beautiful than I ever could have imagined when I drew those plans up.”

“We make a great team,” they says. “I’m excited to see what else we can build and invent together. Are you ready to try it out?”

“Yes!” I exclaim. Putting the brakes on my current chair and using the strength of my arms, I transfer myself into my new one. It feels so comfortable, I can hardly believe it. “It feels great so far,” I say.

“Wonderful,” Amalya says. “Now, you’ve got this handy joystick that you can use to steer. Like in your plans, it is powered by the sun during the day, but it can also be plugged into the solar power grid to charge, you know if it’s cloudy or you want to charge it overnight. And of course, you can still move it by wheeling it yourself if you so choose.” They grins. “If you think of any further developments, I am happy to change and improve it.”

I begin playing with the joystick and seeing how fast I can go and how sensitive it is. It is precise. Amalya is quite the engineer, aside from so many other things.

“I love it,” I say. “I am so, so grateful to you and Zama and the sun and the beings of the earth that made this beautiful gift possible.” Zama and Amalya beam at me and at each other.

“Are you ready to head over to my office?” Zama asks. I embrace Amalya one more time and whisper, “Thank you,” into their ear. They smiles and kisses me on the cheek.

“You’re welcome. Have an amazing day with Zama,” they says. Then they grabs Zama’s hand and tells her to have an incredible day with me before they walks off in the opposite direction from where we are going.

Zama walks next to me while I adjust to the speed and power of my new chair. We are both pretty quiet on the way there; it’s still early and much of the village has yet to wake up. We are approaching the market.

“I left my bike over here,” she says as she starts walking away from me to go get it. She turns her head toward me over her shoulder and says, “Then you can see how fast that chair can really go!” She starts running, and grows smaller as she gets farther away. I see her bend over and set her bike upright. She hops on and rides over.

“OK, you ready?” she says as she pulls up along next to me.

“GO!” I say, laughing as I push the joystick full-throttle. My body jerks back, surprised by how much power is released propelling me forward. I start laughing harder, the wind on my face feels amazing.

“Hey!” I hear Zama yell from behind me, laughing. “No fair! I wasn’t ready!” I can hear the funny clinking sound her chain makes as she pedals getting closer under the

steady whizzing sound of my powered chair. I turn my head toward the sound and see her bright face lighting up with joy and determination as she catches up to me. We both keep laughing and start to slow down, becoming more aware of our accelerated heart rates.

“That’s pretty darn fast!” she says, trying to catch her breath.

“No kidding,” I laugh. “I guess I don’t really have an excuse to be late anymore,” I joke. She laughs.

“Whew, what a work out,” she says, as her breathing slows. She rides a couple feet ahead of me. “My building is up here on the right.” She turns her head toward me as she says it and gestures to a tall red-and-brown brick building. My hand lets go of the joystick and my chair stops abruptly. I know this building. I have been here before, a long time ago.

My mind is racing. Flooding with memories of pills and tiny rooms and torn furniture and loneliness and fear. I remember. Images crash over me like waves, versions of myself that I do not recognize. Sleeping on friends’ dirty couches, under bridges, in shelters where I did not feel safe. I was homeless. I was what they called “mentally ill.” But I was not always like that, no, this was not me, could not have been me, I was an architect, a designer, an artist. I was creative—I wasn’t crazy.

“Bryson, you OK?” Zama’s voice brings me back into the present. I look at her, riding back toward me on her bicycle, her hair flowing in the breeze and flying toward me when she stops suddenly and skids her bike sideways at my feet.

My mouth opens to respond, but no words come out. She can sense the terror, the confusion, the remembering. I start breathing more heavily, beginning to cry. She kneels down in front of me.

“I’m here. I’m here,” she says. Taking my glasses off and tossing them in my lap, I bury my face in my left hand and reach out to her with the other. Her soft, sweaty hands touch mine, hold it, support it. Supporting me, letting me be right where I need to be. I melt into a puddle of pain and fear and longing, connection and gratitude and trust.

The night air is crisp and cold. Hope it doesn’t rain tonight, it’s not supposed to. Couldn’t find a couch to crash on today. Guess you find out who your real friends are when you have a “mental break” and lose everything. I don’t really know how I got here, I’m sure I could figure it out if I wrote it down, mapped it all out, tried to remember. I pull up the ratty green and orange sleeping bag, expose my sweatshirt covered arm to the cold to tuck it into my chair on the left side. Under bridges by rivers is one of the best places to sleep around here at night; for the most part, nobody comes down here. There was an old white fella that would sleep under this bridge once in a while. We talked a few times. Really nice guy. He had a bit of a temper at times, but overall nice. He’d share with me, give me things even when he didn’t have enough himself.

I heard they found his body in the river a few weeks ago; no word on cause of death yet. That’s the trouble with sleeping outside by a river, and the trouble with being homeless: either the elements will get you or you’ll get yourself, but in the end no one



really cares about you. Wonder if they even did an autopsy, I doubt they even had a service.

We stayed in the same shelter a while back too, when I was first released from the hospital. They didn't really help me at the hospital, just gave me a prescription to last a couple weeks, a real shallow, surface kind of treatment. I was still messed up. Still angry. I got kicked out of that shelter for threatening the staff. Not like I would actually do anything, they were just words, but I wasn't in the right state of mind anyway. I could try to make it to the hospital tonight, just to have someplace warm to sleep, but the hospital staff get wise about that and they don't treat homeless people very well because of it. I'll tough it out here tonight. Pull my hat down to my eyebrows and pull the sleeping bag up over my nose, so only my eyes are exposed in case I hear something and need to see and react. Looking around one last time before I try to sleep, I see trees and their shadows on the ground covered in a light dusting of snow in the dark. I hear only the trickling water of the river flowing and I drift off.

"Hey," Zama says gently as I drift back into the present. "There you are." She brings her hand up to my face. The outline of her face is a little fuzzy without my glasses on. I take a deep breath in and exhale. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asks somewhat hesitantly.

"I, um..." I struggle to put into words the rushing memories and feelings I just experienced like a storm in my mind and body. "I remember who I was, what I've been

through.” I manage to string this thought together though it doesn’t begin to describe the overwhelming seriousness of what just happened. “I’ve been in the building you work in. Before, in the old world.”

Her blurry face turns away from me as she looks at the building. She turns back toward me. I wipe my face and my glasses on my shirt, put my glasses back on as she comes back into clear view. I see understanding in her face. She looks at me in anticipation, wanting to know and understand more. I want to share it with her.

“Do you want to go inside?” Zama asks. There is a slight hesitation in her voice, but I know she will understand whatever answer I give. The pain is almost overwhelming, but things are different now. I don’t have to be afraid anymore. I want to remember, if only to appreciate who I am now that much more.

“Yes,” I say. “I think I need to.”

“OK,” she says. “You lead the way.”

I nod and lightly push the joystick forward. Zama follows behind, walking her bicycle slowly through the dirt. Each breath becomes heavier as I come closer and closer to the brick building that has become the tomb of tortured secrets of my past. Slowly, I tilt the joystick to the right to face the brick facade fully. Four stories of fading bricks and windows that once held double-paned glass and iron bars now lay bare as the wind blows through the solar curtains that peek out of windows on the upper floors. The room in the very upper left corner still has bars on it. Zama sets her bike down beside the brick wall that lines the wheelchair ramp which extends to the right of the old concrete

stairs leading to wide double doors. She walks up and stands by my side. Her presence is calming; it makes me feel confident.

“I was institutionalized here,” I say, knowing that she’ll understand, knowing that she too was broken in the past world.

“There was a lot of ugliness then, wasn’t there?” she says.

“Yeah, there was.”

I make a decision to propel myself with my hands on my wheels. Using my physical strength makes me feel more conscious, more aware of the pressure and smell of the air and concrete around me. Ancient and sturdy, dark and painful, damp. Zama follows me up the ramp instead of taking the stairs. When we get to the top of the concrete platform, she asks me if I want her to open the door for me.

“Yes, I’m ready,” I say. The large wooden doors used to have stained glass windows in them, I remember. But the glass is gone now and only soldered iron in various shapes remain. Zama opens the door and cool, dry air billows out, revealing more secrets. I can see it how it used to be, tall hallways with shiny checkered floors and paintings sealed on the wall with tempered glass frames that extended outward and had padded corners. Now windblown dirt, dust, and leaves line the checkered floors, along with new vines and plants that have taken root in the shallow soil. Some paintings are still protected from the elements, and some have been altered by rain or snow during the time the building was abandoned.

My hands firmly grab the rims on my wheels and propel me through the threshold into what is simultaneously my past and my future, where I've been and where I'm going, who I was, who I am, and who I will become.



## JASON

I can't stop picturing Jenny's face, warm and smiling and radiant. Not like the last time that I saw her, but how she appeared in my dream last night. Things were like before between us, when things were pretty good, but the world was like this one, not like the old one. Jenny was different too. She was even more beautiful, her laugh was freer, and she danced through tall grass that shimmered in the golden sunlight. God, I miss her. Would have treated her differently if I was given a second chance, in this world anyway. I feel different now. Like I'm beginning to understand what is really important.

I think about my long walk back to the village with Zama often. We talked about so much as shadows fell and the night came alive. I want to see her again.

I'm pushing myself to do something different today and I'm not yet sure how I feel about it. I'm going to go get beer from Darrin at the market instead of picking it up at his home or him bringing it to mine like usual. I'm still going to avoid interacting with other people if I can, but I have yet to see what a 'bustling market' looks like here, and I'd like to.

My current home is on what I would call the outskirts of town. There are a few other homes within the same area, but they are farther apart than most, from what I've seen on nights when the street is quiet and I've walked through the village alone. It seems the elders knew I wasn't ready to live close to other people yet. Hell, I don't know if I ever will be. I'm beginning to understand more things, but I still don't feel like I fit. I try to push these thoughts from my mind as I head toward the village center, trying to open my mind, and be more open to people and experiences.

## ZAMA

Following Bryson as he moves from the solar-powered elevator on the West end of the building to my office on the second floor, I continue to step lightly and quietly, wanting him to experience whatever he needs to. We have both been pretty quiet since we entered the building—occasionally Bryson will touch things or say something about how they used to be. It's like seeing this building I have come to know through new eyes, or old eyes rather. When I chose to set up here, I liked the building for its nostalgic feel, its ancient bricks and cement peppered with new life. Often, I wondered what happened here before this time, and like many things in the old world, I imagined it was painful and broken, but I really had no idea just how painful and broken. Would I have showed Bryson this place if I knew?

He propels himself into my office and stops, looking up at my spider friend in the corner. I follow his gaze and see that a butterfly is caught in the spider's web. Walking up beside him, we both just stare.

"I feel bad for the butterfly," he says.

"Part of me does too," I say. "I try to think about how they are each playing their role, how the butterfly is giving itself to be a part of something bigger, and how the spider is grateful for that gift."

"I was thinking something like that too. I can't quite put it into words, but I think we have a lot to learn from butterflies and spiders."

“I think you are absolutely right,” I smile. “And seeing death as new life. Do you ever wonder if this is some sort of afterlife or dream? It doesn’t feel possible sometimes.”

“I know what you mean,” Bryson says. Looking at him as he continues to watch the spider’s web, I imagine I can see the spider wrapping the butterfly in silk in the reflection of his glasses. Instead I see his rich amber eyes through the reflection, the dark skin around them still puffy from the tears he’s shed today. His short tightly-curved hair is black as night and just as beautiful. His clean shaven face beckons me to caress and comfort him again. He feels me studying him and looks from the web over to meet my gaze.

“As much pain as this building holds for me, I can understand why you chose it for your office. This room especially. There is something forgotten and alluring about it.” He pauses as he looks around one more time before turning back toward the hallway. “Thank you for offering to take me here, even before you knew what it held for me.”

“Of course,” I say. “I admire your strength. Thank you for sharing pieces of yourself and your painful past with me. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

He laughs.

“Sometimes, I can’t either,” he says as he wheels himself back toward the elevator. We move inside and take it back down to the first floor. Before we get back to the front doors, I remember something, something that I’m curious about, something that Bryson might know about.

“Hey, one last thing before we go,” I say. He stops and turns toward me, looking up at me in anticipation. I gesture for him to come to the doorway that leads to the stairs where I usually walk up to my office, the one we passed right by our first time through.

“Do you remember or know anything about this?” I ask as I point to the bleeding blue graffiti that I trace my fingers over each day I come to work.

Bryson’s entire face lights up. “Yeah,” he grins. “I wrote it.”

We leave the building and start heading toward the market. Bryson begins remembering more about the time he spent in the building and tells me about how he got the spray paint, snuck out of his room at night, and left his mark on it. He laughed about how much trouble he got in for that, but he said both he and the orderlies knew he was right. There was no freedom for him or others there.

Before we get too far, I recognize the person walking ahead of us.

“Hey, Jason!” I call. He turns around and smiles, stops and waits for us to catch up.

“Hey Zama,” he says a little awkwardly, almost bashfully. His cheeks turn red.

“It’s good to see you. This is Bryson.” I gesture toward Bryson who smiles and nods at Jason.

“Hey man, it’s nice to meet you,” Bryson says as he extends his hand.

“Nice to meet you,” Jason says. He reaches out to meet Bryson’s hand. For a split second, they are one. I wonder if they feel that.



“What are you up to?” I ask Jason. “Isn’t it a bit early for you to be out? There are other people around.” I smile and joke with him, but I think he knows I’m proud of him.

“Oh, ha ha,” he says as he nudges my shoulder. “I decided to try to interact with some other people today, but so far this interaction is making me question that decision.”

“Oh, you’ve got jokes too, I see.” All three of us let out little laughs.

“We’re heading to the market, do you want to join us?” Bryson asks. “Zama has told me a bit about you, but I’d like to get to know more first hand.”

Jason looks surprised and then overwhelmed by Bryson’s directness and kindness. “Umm... yeah,” he nods, his sandy curls bouncing. “I was going to go find Darrin and get some beer. I’d love to have some company.”

Light and shadows play around us as clouds move across the sky, giving the sun a rest for a little while before moving on and letting it shine upon us fully. We talk as we get closer and closer to the market, about everything and nothing in particular, about things we have in common and things we don’t, about giving and being grateful.



# ZOEY

Today is one of the big market days, so I don't have to go to school. That means I get to spend the day with Christopher and Darrin in the market, which means I sometimes talk with adults, but mostly just play with my friends whose caregivers are at the market today too. Really, it's not that much different from school some days.

After running around with my friends for awhile, I'm thirsty. It's pretty warm and sunny out. I run back under the big white tent, dodging around carts and people and some animals, back to Christopher and Darrin's usual spot for some water. When I get there I see Zama and Bryson and a person that I've seen at our home before but never met.

"Zama!" I yell. I'm excited to see her. We are going to ride bikes together soon.

"Zoey!" She yells back to me in a silly voice while she reaches her arms out to embrace me as I run to her.

"Hi Bryson!" I say as I bounce from Zama's hug to his extended arms.

"Hey Zoey! What kind of trouble are you causing today?" He jokes with me a lot. I like him too. He lets me wear his glasses sometimes.

"Oh, just the usual stuff," I say. "Who are you?" I ask the person that I've seen before, but don't know.

"I'm Jason," he says as he reaches his hand out for me to shake it. "It's very nice to meet you."

"I'm Zoey." I grab his hand and shake it vigorously. As he laughs I remember that I have something to give to Zama.

“Zama! I have something for you,” I say.

She gasps. “You do? Oh I can’t wait to see it!”

“Close your eyes and hold out your hands!” I run around back behind Darrin where Christopher is already bent down digging in the cooler to get Zama’s gift for me.

“Thanks,” I whisper to him. He smiles and winks. I run back around in front of Zama who waits, smiling and giggling with her hands out in front of her and her eyes closed. As I set the small wooden container in her hand, the cool wetness transfers from my hands to hers. She breathes in suddenly, surprised by the coolness.

“OK! You can open your eyes now.” She does. She looks surprised and excited. She begins to cry.

“One of my teachers said the person receiving our gifts might be so grateful that they would cry,” I say. I bring my still wet hands back up to hers. “It’s a chilled wild blackberry soup that I made for you. We picked the berries ourselves and gave thanks to the earth and the blackberry bushes and the blackberries themselves as we created gifts to share.”

“Oh Zoey,” Zama says as she slowly kneels down to the ground and we sit together, hands still holding the cold wooden bowl, “it’s just absolutely beautiful. You are beautiful. Thank you for thinking of and sharing this with me.”

It feels good to be a part of something bigger than me.

## JASON

Walking home from the market alone after spending more time with people than I have in a long time, I can't stop thinking about that little girl and the gift that she gave. She was so excited to give it and Zama was so grateful to receive it. And it was just soup. Cold soup. But, I don't think it's even about the soup. It's about the ingredients in the soup, about interactions with other people and living things, about being thankful for the simplest things. Things I used to take for granted, hell, things I still do. I don't even think I ever said thank you to anyone for the home I was given or the food or water.

What I witnessed today makes me want to do something for everyone, or maybe for at least one person to start. I hear something that brings me out of my thoughts and into my surroundings, a sort of rustling. Looking around, trying to figure out where the noise is coming from, I realize that I've actually walked past my house and am at the edge of the woods, where the road winds off into the forest. I hear it again and look over just in time to see a fox run out of the bushes through the glowing twilight and into the dense forest on the other side, toward the river. Without putting much thought into the idea, I follow it. Running through the sticks and other leaves and plants living on the forest floor, I feel a sense of excitement and adventure that I have not felt since I was a boy. A new sense of exhilaration and purpose and gratitude sweeps over me and I fall to my knees, collapsing in a fit of tears and joy and sorrow for all the years I spent denying this wild part of myself. The silence of the forest tells me that I lost the fox long ago, but I have gained something so much greater.

## ZAMA

Today everyone is gathering to celebrate and give thanks to the earth and the sky and all of its beings. We invite trees and plants, animals and insects, soil and sand, rock and water, and all life to join us as we express our gratitude. We harvest and create together, picking and playing while rejoicing in our oneness with the earth and the grand and righteous complexity of the life she sustains.

The ceremony for all these inhabitants begins where council is held, among the trees and the field, not far from the marsh that lies to the west. When we hold our councils, we want to include as many ecosystems and life forms as possible, and this is especially important when we are honoring and giving thanks to them. The event lasts most of the day, but it is up to each person to express gratitude in the ways that fulfill themselves and other beings most.

Of course, everyone is invited and knows about the celebration because many of us are so close and communicate often. I've invited Jason. I'm hoping he is feeling comfortable enough in this new world to give it a try.

Amalya and I begin walking toward the council land while the earth is still waking. We take our time, stopping to interact with the beings we meet along the way: spiderwebs still glistening with morning dew, trees who extend their branches outward and skyward greeting the morning and us as we walk by, squirrels and birds that chatter and chirp morning songs to the forest and sky. Sometimes we express gratitude for each other by holding hands as we walk, and we express our gratitude for the beings we meet

along the way aloud; some we know quite well and some still hold their mysteries and wisdom to be revealed another day.

As we approach the council grounds, we see others from the village making their way toward them, all greeting beings in their own unique ways. I see Christopher, Darrin, and Zoey walking together, the three of them holding hands. They stop and lean down together to whisper something to wildflowers who are just beginning to open their petals in the morning light. Zoey gently runs her hands back and forth over the grass still wet with dew.

Up ahead, Bryson sits on the ground, leaning up against a tree who has white-and-gray-speckled bark. He looks at peace, his eyes closed, a subtle smile on his tranquil face. Amalya sees him too, their smooth hand slides into mine and squeezes it as we begin to walk more intentionally toward him. As we get closer, he hears the sounds of our footsteps and opens his eyes.

“Well good morning, beautiful humans,” he says.

We greet him with kind words and hugs as we join him and the tree, sitting and rejoicing together. Zoey, Darrin, and Christopher make their way toward us, as well as other members from the village, including the elders and the young, and everyone in between. Soon, we have formed a circle that encompasses grass, flowers, trees, soil, rocks, insects, earth, and beings that are tinier than I can see.

Looking around at the faces of the humans in our village, they are bright and glowing with love, peace, happiness, gratitude and hope. Closing my eyes, I listen to the trees creaking back and forth and against each other in the morning breeze, singing a

song for us, birds and insects chime in with chirping, cawing, and buzzing. A different sort of rustling captures my attention; a sound that gets louder, like someone getting closer with each step. Opening my eyes, I see Jason awkwardly making his way across the field, perhaps with less grace than some of the other villagers, but with intentions that are in the right place. He sees me looking at him and puts his hand up in subtle wave. Beckoning him to join us with a smile and a nod, I long for him to be united with our circle, to tap into the wisdom offered by the earth and her beings, to understand the great gift we have been given, and to long to give back in return.

