

Chickadee Dancing

Laura left when everything started turning to paper. Not just her house, the walls billowing and transparent, but him too: a two-dimensional man, shallow and whole at the same time. There's only so much time a girl can live with a man made of paper and salt. It wasn't the paper itself that Laura had a problem with; in fact there had been several moments in her life when she thought she was in love with it. The clean sawdust smell of a new page, the flaking edges of an old book, she even found pleasure in the reluctant way it rips apart. She just didn't want to turn to paper herself. Didn't want to blow away or burn.

So she found a job as a backcountry caretaker and took to the mountains. Daniel knew this wasn't Laura leaving. It was Laura pressing pause. Laura finding solitude. Laura refusing the squeezing pressure of time. The job would only last six months – the turning of two seasons. She would fix the trails, protect the moss, teach the clumsy hikers, walk the weaving silence of the forest. And so Daniel folded into waiting like a sleeping plant in snow. He had always been patient until it hurt, confident until everyone believed him, and honest until it seemed as though only he spoke the truth. These were the things she would always love about him and these were the things that Laura needed to leave.

He was the one who had gotten her the job in the lab of ornithology the year before. Told his cousin's husband that she was looking for something to do and that she had majored in English in college, knew how to write. The cousin's husband worked there: a bird scientist. Laura was silent about the idea at first, protective of

her words. She had never paid much attention to birds other than absently observing a broken feeder or whistling back to the opening chorus of Spring. But when she said this to him in her settled voice, he already had his easy response ready.

“They don’t need someone who knows about birds, just someone to go through the field notes and the old guides and write up new paragraphs for the online database or something. You’ll do fine. Great, even.”

Laura narrowed her eyes at the page she was reading and nodded without looking up.

“They want you to start Monday. This’ll be good, Chickadee.”

She looked up now, startled to hear the name he hadn’t called her in months. Chickadee. Tiny flitting bird. She hadn’t heard that giddy fever in his voice since the beginning, from underneath slippery arms, or whispered into her naked back. She had preferred him then, without the suffocating sincerity he spoke to her with now. Before love, before need, before words like arrows shot past each other in the damp air of their apartment.

“This will be good,” she’d repeated slowly, tasting the words in her mouth.

“Well, don’t you think? It’ll get you out of the house. Get you writing.”

“About birds.”

“About something, Laura.”

And with the sharp edge of her real name, she turned back to her book, and he turned and left the room without even the comfort of anger on his patient face.

That’s the trouble with a paper man. Turn him sideways and he’ll disappear.

So Laura left. Or pressed pause. Turned the dial down to static. She moved out of their square apartment and into a thick canvas tent filled with stale dust. The walls shone orange marmalade in the morning and shadowed scenes danced across them at night. She left everything she owned in the square apartment, except for her old camera, a shoebox filled with film, two crates of her father's old camping gear and one of Daniel's shirts. She bought a brand new backpack graded for 80 pounds and filled it with dry food and books. He wasn't home when she left even though she told him she could wait to say goodbye.

The tent was built on a wooden platform 2.4 miles from the trailhead and 0.8 from the summit of the mountain. An old logging road crossed the trail a twenty-minute hike back from the platform, where park service trucks could drop off supplies or pick up injured hikers. Laura thanked the ranger and told him she could manage on her own. She was impatient for the scalding silence of being alone and terrified that his enthusiasm would make the tent something other than hers.

Inside the tent there was one thin grey mattress, a splintering bookshelf, a box for old trail journals, a box of new trail journals and a broom. Outside the platform was a picnic table chained to the ground and a tiny stream running down the mountain on the other side of the trail. A little farther up were the outhouse and the bear box where she would keep all her food. Laura stacked her books into towers on the floor, rearranging them over and over: from biggest to smallest, in rainbow order, the ones she read once a year to the ones she had yet to read, the ones that she'd written poems in the margins of, the ones Daniel had given her, the

ones that her father had told her to read. She pulled out Daniel's shirt and breathed him in, the smell of sex and the white light of winter mornings. She almost put it on, but thought better of it, folded it and placed it in the corner of the top shelf.

* * *

For a while Laura had almost enjoyed working at the lab, writing up descriptions of bird behavior she'd never even seen. She had liked the way it felt to wake up with Daniel again, to watch the way he stretched inward instead of out, hugging the dreaming comfort in. Once, she had tried to imitate it – to see if that way of stretching into the new day was more effective – but she'd had to spread her arms almost immediately, she'd felt crushed. She liked how Daniel asked about her day without tender fear in his voice.

She had even started to enjoy her walk to work, calm and linear, among the crumpled grey hydrangea and the whispering hiss of paper skyscrapers in the wind. But the bird scientist's secretary told her there were too many words in her descriptions and that she needed to tone it down to fact. She'd handed Laura a page of her mistakes from the scientist and smiled blankly at her before going back to her desk.

Blackburnian Warbler, nesting: *The Blackburnian Warbler builds their nest with torn twigs and plants, lashing the pieces together with the glittering threads of spider*

webs, placed at the tip of a conifer branch. They line their nest with lichen, moss and ~~rotting~~ pine needles.

Northern Saw-whet Owl: *This ~~arrogant~~ owl has a small ~~creamy~~ speckled body and a round ~~feline~~ face with ~~piercing~~ yellow eyes. They are nocturnal ~~and illusive~~, ~~but fierce~~ predators ~~and loyal mates~~. They are mostly silent, but ~~at night~~ their high-pitched call ~~pierces the evergreen forests they inhabit~~.*

Black Phoebe, behavior: *Black Phoebes ~~like to~~ perch on low hanging branches near ~~bodies of~~ water, making ~~nervous~~ flights to capture insects for food. They pump their ~~tuxedo~~ tails ~~like they're treading air~~, ~~screeching their chirping warning song~~ incessantly.*

* * *

The forest was itching in May, new green pushing against solid ground. Laura moved into her tent wearing only a t-shirt, and three days later she woke up to fine snowflakes drifting slowly towards the ground. She closed her eyes upward and imagined it was sand falling from the sky, imagined the neat grit of it getting in her nose and seeping through her skin. She thought of how if she had turned to paper, the grains of ice would stumble down the flatness of her back, melting instead into the warmth of the soil below.

In May, Laura's job was to clear the dead from the trails. She would wade through the melting paths and drag stones or logs into particularly sodden parts, reinforcing the collapsing mesh of the earth in spring. In the shelters and trailheads she placed fresh journals for the hikers to brag and commiserate, collecting the old ones. Sometimes she would leaf through and read some of the entries that people crafted in their tired hands and feel momentarily sad for their lost days, getting boxed up and stored, forgotten the second she was done reading. She sliced her favorite entries from the journals with her knife and buried them near her tent. A graveyard of words.

In the quiet afternoons when she was done with her work and too wistful to read, she would sit with her camera and pass hours with the sparrows and the finches. She learned to sit silently, waiting again and again after each zip of her camera's shutter for the birds to forget she wasn't part of the forest. They would glare at her before flying away and pausing nervously nearby. Soon, she was only taking pictures of birds, filling up whole rolls of film trying to capture one bird with her lens. She felt she was cleaning new parts of the forest, turning the buzzing colors into focus with her twisting hands.

Laura started waking up earlier and earlier, savoring the wandering light right before the sun rose over the mountains. She'd tear the pages from her books as she read, cutting out her favorite words and rearranging them into scattered poems, cemented with sap against the blackened inner skin of bark. She would press her fingers into the grooves of trees and silently thank them for being whole.

One morning in the middle of the summer, Laura found a little clearing near the summit a half-mile off the trail where the trees were starting to fade, and a floating cliff appeared, hidden from the passing hikers. A rocky precipice that jutted from the mountain like a shelf. It was high enough in altitude that the trees and shrubs she was picking her way through looked bare and foreign compared to the thick green of the conifers below. The bald rock of the clearing extended out from itself into a small chair, and the little corners of it sprouted with alpine lichen and the feathered moss that she was there on the mountain to protect. The fragile fingers of moss clung to the rock, happy to attach their rare loyalty in exchange for the rocks inert assurance.

For Laura, stepping into this unknown clearing felt like breaking into some new kind of truth. The clarity in this tiny sideways summit was only hers. She started climbing to the clearing every morning to catch the sunrise, and for the first time she knew how much more precious this was than the blinding sunset. The colors were cleaner, the rising flakes of light more optimistic. Every morning she bathed in the soft comfort of her fresh sun. She felt the vertical line of her spine and pinched the flesh of her wrist. She felt the truth as though it were escaping the thin yellow air around her – how people are terrified of being whole and fearless when they are broken, how she chose to be lonely when she was surrounded by brilliant love.

A few weeks after she found the hidden cliff, Laura noticed a pair of wood thrushes building their nest in the low shrubs twenty feet from the clearing. It was probably the second nest of the season, the busy mother bird well practiced and

ready. She heard the male birds fluting call days before she saw his female companion carrying dead leaves to the nest and remembered that unlike other birds who repeated the same call over and over in competition, each male had their own song. Wood thrushes have a y-shaped voice box, giving them two notes where other songbirds have one – they harmonize alone. She also remembered that when the cowbirds were too lazy to build their own nests, they laid their eggs in her carefully woven one and she would take them in, feeding them and teaching them to fly alongside her own fledglings.

Laura imagined what it would be like to be a female wood thrush. To choose her mate from the way the melody they sing for her shivered through her bones. She would choose the haunting lullaby of the loon, monogamous and viciously protective. She imagined what it would be like to be a bird instead of human. She thought for a moment she would be the pine siskin, nomadic and wild. Or the peregrine falcon, migrating 15,500 miles a year. But here's the thing, if she could really be a bird, any bird, she would probably still choose the chickadee. They stay where they love, they endure the turning of the year, hold onto sameness through shocking heat and blistering cold. Daniel was right about that, at least.

* * *

This morning was the same as every other morning on the mountain. Laura woke in the grey shadows before dawn and climbed to her cliff near the summit. But this time, she brought with her the shoebox filled with reels of captured birds. As

she stepped onto the clean rock from the forest, the sun broke through the earth, bleeding yellow over the trees. Laura took a canister labeled *Cedar Waxwing in Snow*, pried off the metal cap and pulled the shiny ribbon of film into the light. She imagined the pictures sizzling and disappearing in the sun. She did it over and over again, *May – Red Pole, Nesting Wood Thrush, Chickadee Dancing*. Every bird she'd captured, she now let free. She held them up to the sunrise and let them take flight with the sparking burn of morning. Lifted them up and let them migrate into the sun. She'd be damned if they turned to paper too.

She sat with her feet dangling in the air above the mountain and shouted *CHICK-ADEE* as loud as she could. The echoes that returned were in Daniel's voice. The way he said it the first time, full of laughter. The way he said it over the phone when he missed her. The way he said it in the months after her father died. The way he said it when he asked her to marry him. The ghost of it in the months since she'd said no.

He said she made him want to be good, that she made him think and made him feel the difference between every day and a whole lifetime. He said these things and she felt them all back, but she said not yet and then she left. Sometimes the skies were a lucid blue canvas for Laura's sunrises, mostly they weren't. But every day, there were little birds making their nests of mud and hair. Every day the alpine moss was stepped on and stepped around. Every day the echoes returned and she was loved.