

TOO
ALIVE,
STILL

OLIVIA POWELL

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First Edition
ISBN 979-8-9916329-0-4

Published by
Olivia Powell
Nashua, New Hampshire

Little bird, little bird
These are for you.

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A Note

I wrote these story-starts, half-poems, and rambling narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few years later, I assembled them into this collection. Each piece is horribly unfinished and largely unedited yet feels too alive, still, not to share.

I. Preface

THERE IS A PLACE WHERE THE CLIFFS ARE LONELY EXCEPT
for the seabirds who fly in twice every day to the cove
and the little boat with a window that matches the
window on a cottage above. This cottage can't be seen
from the cliffs and the cove; it is hidden—farther back
and down the hill—somewhere where it can barely
exist. These cliffs are tall and descend in sandy grayness
and crags to a small, mostly pebbly beach which twists
and curves around moss-covered boulders, sneaking out
a place for itself. When the seabirds fly in—once in the
morning and once at night—they rest on the boulders

and the crags and hold council on stones just inside the tide. The tide also comes in twice a day.

Before we imagined this cottage on these cliffs above and unseen and the boat with its window pulling into the cove, this place was real. This place was blue and green and white and gray and smelled like the cleanest air and the most hidden place on earth. The breeze was crisp and salty, the waves were small but relentless, the sun shone with abandon even though it wasn't in season.

This is the place where they would go.

**

Now there are the two of them, standing near the edge of the cliff but mostly on the hill which slopes down in mossy clumps and tufts. The ocean wrestles itself unseen behind.

She is left alone on the cliff.

She turns around to the ocean, looking for something to fight.

II. Precarious

IT STARTED IN A CAVE.

It started with Time.

(It's like I'm clawing at the edge of a cliff, begging my fingers to catch hold of the grass and let me hang on—not even thinking about pulling myself up onto the hill, not yet. But not trusting my fingers, the grass; not trusting anyone except myself. I don't know to which story these things belong. I just have to write them. It is, perhaps, a precarious sort of writing.)

She throws spears, and

She was a fisherman.

And it starts with her (she is the girl standing by the cave).

It started in a cave.

I could write about the blue waves cresting, curling and
crashing over each other at the cave's door,
about the misty blueness and the gray sun that had
disappeared behind a wall of clouds,
or about the girl
who stood on an outcropping of stone
and let her bare feet be nipped by the salt and wind.

She was something like thirteen.

I could write that she had long dark hair, though you
might imagine something different. Maybe for you her
hair was short sandy blond, pulled back fruitlessly from
her eyes. Maybe she had no hair at all.

-

~~What I will write is that she started with Time.~~

-

~~We all write about Time~~

~~(because well, what else do we have?).~~

-

I will write that it started in a cave.

They came on a ship.

They wore dark midnight blue

like the other warriors of the north-north-east.

They came in the night

tall and

They saw a tall girl standing on a stone by the sea. As the fog faded away—when the sky rose blue with the sun of a morning and the end of the storm—one of them realized that a young man was lying beside her.

She was a fisherman

And he was the hook.

I wonder what you could make of that

Later:

Small boats, lights on the water, I called out to the boat ahead, my voice skimming under the surface of the fog until it reached her ears. She shivered and looked halfway back over her shoulder, as if I were there, whispering in her ear. I saw her fingers tap out a message on the side of the boat, her annoyance, her impatience, my worry. It was alive to be here out on the water, but I knew it might not be any more than that.

But now:

She clasps her hands behind her back. She is a soldier, too, I had forgotten to tell you. There is a character who narratively has to die at the end, but the author decides no.

Overtures:

I.

I count the days through the echoes of a seashell.
I hold it to my ear, and I listen.
To the heartbeat of the sand
and the space between waves,
and I wish that life
would speak a little louder.

II.

The days count me—I am a forest for the trees
I am a windmill on a hill
or a cane in the sand
left by an old woman
as she walked on the beach.
I watched her from above,
on the edge of a cliff.
Wearing a suit and bowtie and black
boots.
It was sometime in the afternoon.

III.

Now the day is white fog
and a morning, ring

.

A young child played on the beach,
while a wedding was held on the cliff above.

I IV III IX LIV II

III. The wall

SOMEWHERE IN THE VALLEYS OF SWITZERLAND THERE WAS a wall. It was the most obvious of walls—the kind to keep something in, or out, to support a roof, to mark a boundary, etc. etc. This wall was made of stone (of the gray and weathered variety) and felt a little bit like running water when Frieda ran her hand along it. Frieda lived in the valley with this particular wall and often came out to visit the wall and the field around it. The field was mostly green and yellow, as you might expect a field to be, though it wouldn't make much difference if the field was as blue as the sky (which was

very rarely blue).

When Frieda came to the wall, she came with the air around her and, usually, an idea in her head. She would greet the wall:

“Hello, Wall.”

and rest her palm against a particularly large stone somewhere near the middle. Then she would settle down to lean against it, a process that went something like: remove hand from wall, kneel on the ground one knee and then the other, turn around and sit at the same time, lower knees, cross legs. Or leave knees bunched up—if she was feeling purposeful that day.

This day, Frieda’s knees remain bunched up. She sits with her back against the stones that feel like water and her arms curled around her legs. The noontime wind feels heavy as it draws across her face and off into the grasses of the field. The wall feels it, too, like it feels the skin-like-stones of the girl of the valley curled up in its embrace.

Frieda is the daughter of a printer in a village

somewhere else in the valley. She would watch the printer lay out rows of metal letters, stacked like stones, to build words and stories. They say this printer had married the Sun and, more recently, they add, in low tones, that the Sun has gone away. But mostly they like to talk about how when the printer married the Sun, she wore a dress spun of blue light that was given to her by the sky.

Frieda often thinks about this sky blue dress, and when she sits against the wall with her knees bunched up, she tries to imagine what it would be like to be the sky with a dress to give away.

When she closes her eyes she can see it (the world).

#

Somewhere in the valleys of Switzerland there is a wall. Five feet long, yay high, made of stone, and easily missed. Nobody remembers when the wall was built or why, though they assume it was built for reasons that walls are built, and so the people of the valley pass by the wall without much thought at all. The wall might have been part of an old church, or the edge

of a lambing field, but now the wall is just part of the valley and it need not invoke any more words about the reason for its wall-ness.

Now, the people who pass by this wall are various in their occupations and reasons for being out in the valley, but all of them pass by the wall without noticing the girl who leans against one side of the wall, somewhere near its middle.

“Hello, Wall,” she says, but none of them hear.

None of them watch this girl fold herself into a seated position against the wall. None of them imagine with her what it would be like to be the sky.

(If Frieda were the sky and had dresses to give away, she thinks, she would give away dresses not just of light blue but of morning blue and night purple and evening reds. She would give away robes and suits of high noon and sunset and gray. And the people from the valley and beyond would gather in the field in their sky-clothes and dance like they did at the wedding of the printer and the Sun. They would dance along the top of the wall with flowers in their pockets or clenched

in their teeth.)

None of them see what else the wall could be except the leftover part of a church or the crumbling edge of a lambing field.

#

Somewhere in the valleys of Switzerland there was a boy named Simon who wanted to be a bird. He might have lived in another valley, but one day he comes to the field with the wall. He is on his way to see a printer, but, growing tired on his journey across the valleys, he decides to rest against the wall when he sees it there in the field. He sits down with his back against the stones (they felt like tiny mountains to him) and his legs straight out.

“Hello, Wall.”

“Hello.”

Simon’s response is automatic and followed by silence.

And then a soft rustling.

Frieda settles on her side of the wall, very carefully leaning back into the stones.

“Does this hurt?” She had always wondered that.

“No.

Well, a little actually.”

With some rustling of his own, Simon pulls away from the wall to turn sideways and nestle between, rather than across, the sharp points of two larger stones.

“Oh.”

Frieda pauses. Then another question she has always wanted to ask:

“Does it hurt the way the sky touches you, always and all the time?”

Simon chews his lip, really thinking it over.

Before he can answer, Frieda adds:

“I wish I were the sky.”

“I wish I were a bird.” That was easy. “But no, I don’t think it hurts, the way the sky is always touching us. If I were a bird I would fly closer to the sky. I could fly over this wall.”

“Would there still be a wall if you were a bird?”

Getting comfortable, Frieda crosses her legs and shifts her weight to lean more heavily against the wall.

The wall starts to crumble.

#

“Is it the wall around your heart?” is a question asked of the printer in another part of the valley. When she closes her eyes she can see it—she can see the wall in her mind.

The wall isn’t a metaphor, but it might be an allegory.

IV. tightrope walkers

A TIGHTROPE WALKER, HOW APPROPRIATE! IT IS LIKE THEY have been cut out of the sky. How they must trust the small depressions in the line, in the clouds...and I forget what else I was going to say they should trust. That happens sometimes. The forgetting.

I am Nameless. I am someone who dreams of having two children—and I wonder if they will walk the tightrope beside me. Or if they will have learned how to fly, how to levitate, by then.

A tightrope walker is a distraction, is a channel for your fear. Send me your fear. Let it go. I can take it. I will carry it to the other side for us.

Even if the world is burning in the background.

I will tell you, “Look, it is just the sky. Just the clouds bursting into each other. Do you see how they move?”

And then, once I have made it to the end of the rope, I will be the first to turn around and point and say, “Look, our world is on fire.” I will climb down from the pedestal and come stand among you and ask, “What can we do about it?”

When I was a young child, I slept in the forest. The trees would bow over me and whisper that someday I would suffer a great wound, and it would rip me from my head almost to my toes. And I would feel a great pain, and I would shy away from it. It would make me feel embarrassed. It would make me feel afraid. It would make me feel sad.

The stones that were secreted away between the giant, gnarled roots of these trees of the forest would tut tut

tut and assure me that the trees were being too harsh. I was lucky, though, to be given those words of the trees. I realize now that maybe they were speaking more to themselves than to me.

As I grew, the wind would come along and flirt in my ears. The smell of smoke would brighten my eyes. The fall of rain would be horrible and the most freeing blessing at once.

Standing among you, my audience of the tightrope walkers, I might wonder to myself if I should continue to hide this wound that I am only beginning to see for myself. I wonder at how exhausting it can be just to stand upright, and I marvel at the trees and their ability to do so for hundreds, thousands of years.

What a great burden to carry the sadness of losing trees that are thousands of years old.

Where could I possibly go from here? I am not your hero, nor even your guide. Will you leave me until the next time I walk across the sky on a tightrope?

Dare you take on the whispers of the trees? With me?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivia Powell is a writer, Storyteller and experience designer who wanders across and between narrative mediums, wondering what else stories can be and do.

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