

**Y**ou realize, at some point, that your fantasies are empty. You are living a life that is a self-conscious construct. You are a lightning bug in a jar with ragged holes punched in the lid. You are a frog kept in a box with dead leaves and grass. You have waited for bliss as you've been told it manifests: in romance and family and friendships. At three o'clock in the morning you talk to God, who answers in symbols that are easily misinterpreted.

While the wind rattles brown leaves that have died on the branches, ghosts of moisture press against the inside of the windows from the kettle's steam. The sky is very blue. But there is the feeling of a dense storm coming. The orange and white cat has just come in to look out the windows of a bright yellow room.

D---'s altar is in this room. She has just meditated in front of a white porcelain figure of the Buddha, the awakened one. There is also a candle on the altar, a picture of her son, and a picture of some monk in his refuge – a complete stranger, an old Asian man who is no doubt dead by now. He holds beads in his hands, mala beads he fingers as he repeats his mantra.

When D--- sees herself in that old man's place, living alone in the mountains, she is an old woman. It is only in this fantasy that D--- does not have to be a thin woman, but a content woman, beyond anyone's desire or contempt.

The old woman who trudges up the mountain with no regrets on her back has no worries about her body other than to take care not to fall.

D--- is a woman who has lived for sixty years without settling the issue of whether God exists or not. Like famed beat Zen guru Alan Watts, she was raised in the Episcopal Church, she dove into the Asian wave of metaphysics that was mixed with the flotsam of free love and cheap wine. Still, D--- does

**KATE HORSLEY**

pray. She believes in something, even if it's only the dizzying mystery of time and space, of something coming from nothing. Time and what it has done to her skin, how it has raised the veins on her hands and pulled her face down, seems like part of a mysterious cosmology that grinds people up. The lustrous past seems both mangled and gone. If her child had lived, if he had been able to marry and have his own children, maybe she wouldn't be so desperate about time drying up. She could be a grandmother, an eccentric grandmother. But she is just someone's lover.

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Years and years ago, D--- used to wait in a verdant, fertile park for her lover. Its landscape climaxed in a stone house on a hill overlooking a vast variety of pleasures and dangers: a Japanese garden to the south, a large and murky pond to the east where some shy and unidentifiable water mammal lived. In the distance, past the Japanese garden, was the river with an old canal parallel to it. The canal had been built during the much-romanticized War Between the States, when mules pulled barges loaded with weapons and supplies for the soldiers, young boys, most of whom would die or have at least one of their limbs removed. There was an abandoned mill in the canal, its rusted iron works and large rotted wheel still and silent, lethal. A person could get snagged by corroded metal and drowned in silted waters.

In the winter there were not many people in the park, maybe one or two wandering at a great distance from each other, strolling up and down the hill, black coats against a gray sky. In the winter it was easier to see the river and the canal from the hill since many of the trees were a lattice of sticks among enormous cedars and pines. A white fox also lived in the park. It was often curled into a fur spiral at the base of the large

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black trunk of an old pine tree.

Young like a sapling, D--- was dressed in a long black coat and boots that came up to her knees. She had no gloves on and felt small pieces of lint and paper in the pockets of the coat with her fingertips. She put a scarf over her head and pulled one end of it over her nose and mouth because the cold air hurt. And she waited.

She walked up a long stone stairway that in the grand times had water cascading down it. At the top was an arbor, a long walkway shaded in the summer by a vine of lavender wisteria. D--- posed beneath the tangle of barren tendrils and looked down at the Japanese garden and the canal and river behind it. Her braided apricot-colored hair had not yet turned yellow and white, like straw. Back then she was skinny enough that her large hips and legs simply looked strong. D--- had the body of a lazy dancer who would never go far.

From beneath the long arbor walkway on the top of the hill, D--- could see almost everything in the park, but no one could see her. She wanted her lover to see her. He must see her. The slightly rough texture of his store-bought green army jacket, the musky smell of his neck, and his lips that were two smooth curves on his full moon of a face connected directly to her genitals.

A group of crows started teasing her, when D--- sat on top of a large boulder near a gazebo, visible and exposed to frigid breezes. The sun sneaked out of the sky so that the only thing in plain sight was the white fox, who was creeping way down the hill along the stream in the Japanese garden.

One crow sat on the roof of the gazebo, picking between his toes with his beak.

It was becoming cold enough that D---'s breath was a white mist. She didn't want to stay in the vast park alone

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during the night. She didn't want to die or be horribly uncomfortable and tired and lonely for many hours, not if no one could see the drama unfold. And if she could be a famous dancer someday, or play piano professionally on stage, it would be foolish to die now. And, of course, she had no idea that many years from then her only child would die at eighteen.

The important reality was that her lover wasn't coming. He was somewhere drinking cheap wine with other addicts-in-training. They were telling him that D--- was going to leave him. He couldn't imagine that she'd waited for him, that she'd wanted him to come to that particular park, as though she were his most precious child, where the white fox lived, where the mysterious water mammal made rolling ripples on the surface of a dark pond, where the rust and rot of the old mill made the Japanese garden seem victorious and beautiful.

D--- wanted her lover to be brave and confident enough to come to her, rescue her from leaving him, but he wasn't.

For a few years they had sex whenever he passed through town. And then 25 years went by before they found each other again.

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Fifteen years grind them into chronic weariness.

Her lover doesn't know that D--- is planning to leave him again. Many of the friends who would have been in their sixties and would have told him that D--- was going to leave him again have died of liver or prostate disease.

D--- is purging, culling, going through books, papers, clothes. It is, if nothing else, a massive assessment and simplification of her life.

The process is slow because she's disabled by sentiment. She first jettisons the weight of stuff accumulated recklessly. She is shaping another fantasy to replace the old and now-

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inappropriate fantasies of a young, fertile woman. She never danced on stage, except in college once. She still has the piano she played on as a girl, but it's badly out of tune. But she can disappear without dying, or at least become a solitary mystic.

The basement is the easiest place to start since what's down there isn't something D--- sees every day. Dank, moldy, and shadowed, any light shows scraps of the past, items eaten by insects or put in the dark because they were understood too late. D--- fills boxes with cloth turned to dust by moths, maps sodden and molded, jars of rusted nails, a pair of old ballet shoes and a yellow tutu she wore in first grade. The spiders and the tendrils of old webs that drift across her face make her anxious and she asks herself how she expects to live in seclusion in some wooded mountains if spiders make her anxious. Almost all of what is down there goes in the trash, except books.

Upstairs there are hundreds more books.

D--- holds a water-damaged volume of poems by Keats, ready to put it in the bag to take to the used book seller, and as she leafs through the pages she sees "Ode to a Nightingale" –

*That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,*

*In some melodious plot*

*Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,*

*Singest of summer in full-throated ease.*

She puts the book back on the shelf.

Souvenirs of her childhood recline on shelves and window sills. D--- can't toss them into the garbage – the poor, blue ceramic camel she forgot to put a hump on that her siblings derided; a black naked woman leaning against a rock whose clay feet have broken off at the ankles; a thin piece of